Case Study: Justice Funders
Interview Date: Dec 12th, 2023
Interviewee: Rachel Humphrey (She/Her), Senior Director of Practice Acceleration, 9 years at Justice Funders

Organizational Background:

- **Mission:** Justice Funders is a partner and guide for philanthropy to advance a thriving and just world. Following the lead of movements working for racial, economic, and social justice, the organization is aligned with the Just Transition. The organization started as a member-based affinity group and has since grown to become a political home for the left in philanthropy.

- **Region:** Justice Funders was started as a San Francisco Bay Area regional organization, however operates nationally.

- **Size:**
  - 19 full-time staff
  - 10 board members
  - Annual budget above $1 Million

- **WSDN Status:**
  - In 2019 the team of 8 staff members began to explore how they wanted to build a structure that more aligned with their organizational values. They were a fiscally sponsored project at the time. Working with a consultant, the team established a Co-Executive Director model, became their own 501c3, recruited their first board of directors, and, by 2021, became a Worker Self-Directed Nonprofit. Currently, the team is continuing to work with the consultant to adjust and refine the structure.

Structure:

- Justice Funders operates with a Circles structure. Instead of having a “senior leadership team” all major strategic organizational decisions are made in these circles:
  - Regenerative Finance
  - Program Strategy and Cohesion
  - People-Centered Systems
  - Learning and Engagement
  - Governance

- All staff generally serve on two circles and all Circle Leads sit on the Governance Circle. In current conversations around the growth and development of the structure, the team is exploring how to create more opportunities for cross-circle collaboration and communication, and how to better differentiate between strategy and implementation.

- The organization does still have a hierarchy in the form of tiers: Co-Executive Directors, Senior Directors, Directors, and the occasional Manager. The Co-EDs each participate in two circles in addition to the Governance Circle. The team has grown significantly since first establishing this structure and is currently discussing future changes to these tiers.

- **Board of Directors Structure:**
The Board of Directors was recruited while the organization was deciding to be a WSDN. The role of the Board is to act as strategic advisors to the circles. Each circle has a Philanthropy rep and a Movement rep from the Board. Movement Board members are offered compensation for their service. The Co-ED’s also sit on the board, with one serving as Board Secretary and the other serving as Treasurer.

What has been integral to making this work for your team?

- Working with a consultant has been a key part of Justice Funders developmental process. The research, resources, templates, and articles on democratic governance brought by the consultant have been very helpful.
- Resources that the team has created include:
  - Updated description of all of the parts of the organization, how they are values aligned, and why they exist
  - Governance decision-making matrix
  - Guidelines and tools for how to make decisions. Including how to create a proposal in a way that will use the structures well.
  - Gradients of agreement process
- Clear written out processes for practice while not getting bogged down in bureaucracy.
- There has been a huge amount of personal and interpersonal work to build trust, feedback, and conflict literacy.
- Co-ED’s receiving coaching prior to moving into co-directorship, as well as in key moments since.

What are some of the challenges you have faced since becoming a WSDN?

- Establishing a new structure and doubling in staff size within a 2-year period has been a real challenge. Justice Funders went from a very nimble small organization to a large organization with a lot of systems and processes to develop, learn, and practice.
- Recognizing that this is a new and unfamiliar structure to everyone and without clear processes there is a danger of falling into either structurelessness or old habits of defaulting to power.

What are some highlights you have experienced since becoming a WSDN?

- Being able to truly be a learning organization. Taking hard moments and doing the deep reflection of integrating those learnings into practice.
- Because of this model, they have been able to hire staff who are thinking about power in a critical way and are interested in this organizational structure. This has contributed to a baseline of shared values across the team.
- Times when the structure really works and makes it possible for the team to make decisions that are thoughtful, responsible, well-researched, and beneficial to individuals and the organization as a whole. Such as increasing the compensation levels. Full engagement from the team meant that the decision served the team well and was agreed upon by those responsible for fundraising for the increased expenses.
What advice would you give to an organization considering shifting to a WSDN?

- Do not double your staff team at the same time - take into account how much change a group of people can handle at any given moment.
- Make decisions in a way that allows you to work through their implications as you go.
- Get support. A consultant is one way to do this.
- When recruiting new team members for staff or board seek candidates that have experience in similar models and make sure to have in mind the future structure you are planning for.
- Engage in Appreciative Inquiry, which is a “model of organizational and social change that seeks to engage stakeholders collectively in imagining and designing better possibilities for themselves.”