The Cal Turner Moral Leadership Fellowship is a great program. The project that I was involved in not only gave me the opportunity to help the community, but also changed my way of thinking about approaching a problem. Our project was meant to help the Tennessee Office of Refugees (TOR) in finding qualified recipient organizations of federal grants that would use the grants to help refugees settle in Tennessee. TOR’s problem of being unable to find organizations willing to apply for grants from TOR appeared to be a new one. We thought that maybe there were some barriers to effective communication and organizations would come forward once grant information is effectively communicated to them. With the help of TOR, a new round of grant application solicitation was launched. Our plan was to observe the whole process to find any communication barrier. But before we could, applications came in and the problem seems to have disappeared. Was there really a problem of no willing applicant? Was it just bad timing back in 2011? And then in the meeting with TOR, we learned that maybe it is not that nobody would apply because the grant was not well communicated, but that everybody knows about the grant but only well-established organizations apply. So the problem is: how do we get the grants to start-up organizations and help them build themselves?

It is a pity that we don’t have enough time to follow up on this discovery. But the turn of events teaches me that identifying the real problem is part of finding the solution. If future fellows take up this project, which I strongly recommend, they would be able to build on what we have learned. Here, I would just share my two cents as a word of caution. It is easy to go into the mode of thinking about what could be changed here and there without realizing the cause of an issue may be built into the process. A grantor, or a grant administrator like TOR, must be able to distinguish organizations that will put the grants to good use from those that don’t have a viable plan. It must also be able to distinguish organizations that are serious committed in helping refugees in the community from those that may have different motives. Now, how can organizations come up with a viable plan and demonstrate their seriousness if they are new and inexperienced? In a sense, it is about the communication of information from the grantee to the grantor, not the other way around. And finally, it may turn out that this is not a real problem either because start-up organizations have other sources of funds but do they?

I think these are the questions that future fellows will have to think through if they continue what we have started. Maybe they will end up with discovering “the real problem” as we did. It is in this process that we learn the skills of leadership, at least I did, thanks to the Cal Turner Moral Leadership Fellowship.

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