Mutual Futures

Field Case Studies

Power, Trust, and Control in a Private Family Foundation

CASE NO. 001

THE CASE

More than a decade ago, I served as a senior program officer at the Laughing Gull Foundation (LGF), a small, private family foundation headquartered in Durham, NC. LGF was framed as a progressive foundation, committed to justice. At the time, it had three areas of focus: environmental justice, LGBTQ equality and higher education in prison.

The Foundation was still in its first couple of years of operation when I started. We were a staff of three: a CEO and an administrative assistant, both White women, and myself, a Black woman. The board of directors was comprised of the CEO's immediate family.

This case study series examines moments that shaped my understanding of power, trust, and control inside a small private family foundation. While the events described are specific, the dynamics are not. Program officers working in family philanthropy often navigate informal authority, shifting expectations, and ambiguous norms that can shape both strategy and staff relationships.

Each case in this series presents a real scenario followed by analysis and discussion questions intended for program officers, foundation leaders, and philanthropy practitioners seeking to build healthier organizational cultures and clearer leadership practices.

PART I: The Dress Code

THE INCIDENT

This case is not about clothing. It is about the signals leaders send before a new staff member's first day and how small policy decisions can shape trust and vigilance inside a foundation. For program officers—particularly those entering family foundations—moments like this can reveal how discretion, control, and informal norms operate. As you read, consider what this interaction signals about early trust formation and the role of identity in the enforcement and interpretation of organizational expectations.

A couple of days before I was set to start my new role at the Laughing Gull Foundation, I received an email from the Foundation's CEO. In her note she explained that the Foundation had a business casual dress code, which to her meant nice clothes that weren't jeans or sneakers. She went on to say that if we needed to get more specific about the definition of business casual, we could, but in the interim she hoped that I had gained a sense of the Foundation's aesthetic from a board meeting I had attended prior to starting the role.

I replied to the note the next day, asking whether there was an explicit rule against wearing jeans to the office, since her first message had left this unclear to me. Her reply was lengthy, explaining why she believed blue jeans were a slippery slope and stating that she and the other staff member often opted for "nicer" jeans in black or gray. She went on to explain that she was a perpetually casual dresser and had instituted the no-jeans rule after slipping into the habit of wearing shorts and T-shirts at work. More broadly, she said her goal was to ensure that we all arrived at the office with a "fairly professional" appearance in case we had unforeseen visitors. She added that she was open to discussing another approach and gave the example of a colleague who also worked in philanthropy and often wore jeans with a smart blazer—a look she described as "cool."

The following day I arrived at LGF's headquarters for my first day of work. Our office was located in a predominantly residential community adjacent to the city center where multi-unit residential properties were often sublet as office space. We had four rooms on the first floor of the property. A fifth room in the rear was occupied by another tenant and there were residential tenants above us.

When I arrived, I was greeted by the only LGF staff member, the administrative assistant, who had been working for the Foundation for about a year. To my surprise, she was dressed very casually in jeans and sneakers. When I asked her about the dress code, she replied, "What dress code?"

It was later confirmed at a team meeting that, prior to my arrival, a dress code did not exist. In fact, there had been no explicit conversations about office attire at all. Instead, the issue was framed as an emerging need of a growing startup, prompted by an increase in the number of staff members.

Selective Enforcement and Early Trust

One of the things I noticed about the CEO's email was its stream-of-consciousness style. It meandered, hedged, and over-explained in ways that created more confusion than clarity about the policy itself. Based on previous experiences with philanthropic leaders who made and broke rules somewhat whimsically, the tone signaled that I was dealing with someone comfortable exercising discretion in an off-the-cuff manner.

The dress code felt like a just-in-time reaction—though to what, I was never quite sure. I already had a full onboarding plan in place that could easily have addressed office norms, including attire. Yet the issue surfaced with urgency just two days before my start date. That timing replaced any excitement I felt with pause. When I later learned that the no-jeans policy had been communicated only to me, whatever early trust we had begun to build was noticeably weakened.

Trust is not a single thing—it's death by a thousand cuts and life by a thousand gestures. It is hard-earned and easily lost. We can trust someone's competence but not their consistency; trust that they'll say the right thing but not that they'll do the right thing. We can trust someone's intentions but still question their judgment. Trust is difficult to define because it is so layered. This moment didn't destroy trust outright, but it peeled away a few of its layers. As an early signal, it shaped the conditions under which trust would need to be built from that point forward.

- Selective or uneven policy enforcement—especially before a role even begins—can quickly erode trust. For program officers entering small foundations, consistency is often the primary indicator of whether discretion will be exercised fairly or unpredictably.
- What leaders choose to emphasize before a new staff member's first day signals what they prioritize and how they exercise discretion. In small foundations, where formal policies are often still forming, these early signals carry outsized weight. They shape how a program officer understands authority, consistency, and the reliability of leadership from the outset.

Control, Vigilance, and Positionality

It was never lost on me that, in joining LGF, I was entering a very specific context. As a Black woman, I would be a highly visible staff member in a leadership role within an organization built for and by a White, wealthy Southern family. Before I even interviewed for the role, several of my colleagues shared stories of their unfortunate experiences with private family foundations and urged me to reconsider my interest in the job altogether. So, it was clear to me at the outset that neither the setting nor my presence within it was neutral.

All of us carry things—and as a Black woman, that load is heavy and runs deep. There's constant mental and emotional labor involved in extending good faith while self-protecting, especially when race and gender are always present but not always animating. *Is it because I am Black? A woman? The answer is always no, even when the answer is yes.*

The dress code debacle could have simply been an innocent leadership misstep by an anxious and inexperienced founder of a new philanthropic startup. However, it could also have been anticipatory surveillance, implicit bias, a microaggression—the list goes on. Regardless of intent, the impact was the same: I entered my new role vigilantly.

- In asymmetrical power contexts—such as small private family foundations—minor policies can take on the function of surveillance, particularly for staff whose identities make them more visible or scrutinized. Whether intended or not, early control moves can trigger vigilance that shapes how a program officer engages from that point forward.
- Vigilance is often fueled by ambiguity and uncertainty; when expectations are unclear or unevenly applied, staff may begin to scan for patterns, trying to determine how decisions are made and how consistently rules will be enforced.

Informality and Organizational Credibility

Private family foundations often struggle with their reputation in the broader field of philanthropy. They can be perceived as flighty, unserious, bulls in a china shop—or, at worst, destructive. In fact, this was the primary critique shared by colleagues before I interviewed for the role. Several cautioned that it might not be a serious professional environment.

Almost instinctively, I interpreted the CEO's email and her handling of the dress code through that reputational lens. I worried that the concerns my colleagues had raised might be validated. There was no immediate loss of confidence—I had gathered plenty of offsetting information during the lengthy interview process to balance this moment. Still, a seed of doubt had been planted. I found myself scanning for inconsistencies. *Would this be an organization I could publicly stand behind? Was leadership serious about its strategy, or would priorities shift without warning?*

- In small family foundations, where informality and concentrated authority often coexist, seemingly minor decisions can shape how seriously staff take the organization and its leadership. Early signals about consistency, professionalism, and discretion can influence whether program officers experience the foundation as a stable professional environment or an unpredictable one.

Discussion

1. Consistency and discretion: How should leaders introduce or enforce new policies in small foundations where formal systems may still be developing? What risks arise when expectations are communicated informally or applied unevenly across staff?
2. Equitable treatment and identity: How might identity (race, gender, role, tenure, etc.) influence how workplace policies are communicated, enforced, or experienced? What steps can foundation leaders take to ensure that expectations are applied equitably and do not unintentionally create heightened scrutiny or vigilance for certain staff members?