



# CATALYTIC LEADERSHIP IN PHILANTHROPY

2025 Year End Update

January 2026

## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, Exponent Philanthropy launched the [Catalytic Leadership in Philanthropy](#) (CLIP) initiative, a robust and ever-expanding suite of publications, programs, and resources to support and amplify the impact of our 1,500+ members as they strive to transform their communities through informed giving.

In 2025, the CLIP initiative matured from a unifying framework into a lived practice for lean funders across the country. Building on the momentum shared in our [mid-year update](#), Exponent Philanthropy focused on helping funders not only understand catalytic leadership, but apply it through learning, experimentation, and action rooted in community priorities.

CLIP reached funders at scale through conferences, publications, podcasts, and the blog; deepened practice through high-touch leadership development; and sparked real-world action as program alumni translated learning into new partnerships, convenings, and systems-level interventions. Together, these efforts strengthened Exponent Philanthropy's role as both a national platform for catalytic leadership and a trusted partner in helping lean funders lead beyond traditional grantmaking.

We are pleased to share this year-end update with you, highlighting how CLIP showed up in 2025 across learning spaces, field-facing resources, and on-the-ground action, and how those investments are reshaping philanthropic practice.

## FROM LEARNING TO ACTION: CLIP AT THE 2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Catalytic Leadership in Philanthropy was a core focus of Exponent Philanthropy's [2025 Annual Conference](#) in Columbus, Ohio. Through **thirteen CLIP-focused sessions**, hundreds of foundation staff and trustees engaged with CLIP as a practical leadership approach for lean funders at a pivotal moment for the philanthropic field.

Sessions equipped participants with core skills and practices, including listening to community voice, understanding systems and power, and engaging boards in learning, while demonstrating how foundations put CLIP into practice through convening, collaboration, advocacy, participatory grantmaking, and narrative change. Across the conference, funders gained practical tools to move from learning to action and advance equity-centered, systems-level impact. Participant feedback reflected increased confidence and readiness to bring CLIP back to their foundations, reinforcing Exponent Philanthropy's role in embedding catalytic leadership across the philanthropy field and in every community across the nation.

### Participant reflection:

*"I feel empowered to bring Catalytic Leadership in Philanthropy back to my organization. I believe that CLIP is a great next step for us, since we already are practicing trust-based philanthropy. The CLIP-related sessions prepared me to bring it back to my board and staff."*

*"[Exponent Philanthropy's] programs are full of thoughtful, practical content that will help foundation leaders improve their practice. The content on catalytic philanthropy shows grantmakers how to achieve impact."*

## EXTENDING CATALYTIC LEADERSHIP BEYOND EXPONENT PHILANTHROPY

In 2025, Exponent Philanthropy also extended CLIP's reach beyond its own network by sharing the framework with peer institutions and broader philanthropic audiences. Exponent designed and facilitated a session at the Council of Michigan Foundations Annual Conference titled *From Grantmakers to Changemakers: Catalyzing Leadership in Philanthropy*.

The session highlighted two leanly staffed Michigan foundations and focused on how staff and boards worked together to rethink their roles, leverage relationships, and shift practices in pursuit of deeper, systems-level impact, demonstrating CLIP's relevance beyond Exponent's membership and its resonance across the field.

## SCALING CATALYTIC LEADERSHIP THROUGH FIELD-FACING RESOURCES

Exponent Philanthropy's publications and case studies expand CLIP's reach and translate the framework into practical, real-world application for funders at varying stages of practice. Benchmarking reports and applied case studies demonstrate how CLIP's virtues, skills, practices, and catalysts show up in everyday grantmaking, supporting lean funders as they move beyond grantmaking toward catalytic action.

### Embedding Catalytic Leadership in the Sector's Premier Benchmarking Report

Thanks to your partnership, CLIP was embedded in the [2025 Foundation Operations & Management Report \(FOMR\)](#), Exponent's most downloaded publication of the year with **941 downloads**. Released in February, the report served as a high-impact channel to reach funders at scale and reinforce catalytic leadership as a practical, values-driven approach to philanthropy.

Within the publication, CLIP was integrated through:

- A dedicated section introducing CLIP as a framework for long-term, systems-level impact
- Practical guidance on leadership mindsets, skills, and grantmaking approaches that support learning, equity, and community-centered practice
- Real-world examples showing how funders use relationships, influence, and non-grant assets alongside grantmaking
- CLIP principles woven throughout the report, positioning catalytic leadership as both a guiding framework and an operational lens

**Looking ahead:** In 2025, Exponent also advanced work on the 2026 FOMR, to be released in February 2026. The upcoming report will feature an expanded and more explicit CLIP section, continuing to embed catalytic leadership within the sector's premier benchmarking resource.

### Learning Through Practice: Seed Grants and Catalytic Leadership

In [Growing Catalytic Philanthropy Through Seed Grants](#), Exponent Philanthropy applies the CLIP framework through a real-world case study of the Howell Conservation Fund's Catalytic Grant Program. The publication shows how lean funders can support early-stage innovation and advance systems-level impact through flexible, relationship-centered grantmaking.

CLIP is woven throughout the case study through:

- Framing CLIP as a complementary approach alongside trust-based philanthropy
- Real-world examples of learning, experimentation, and adaptive leadership in early-stage funding
- Practical illustrations of how funders use relationships, listening, and landscape awareness to inform grantmaking
- Grantmaking practices that emphasize flexibility, simplified processes, and sustained engagement beyond the initial grant
- Transparent reflection on trade-offs and learning, reinforcing CLIP as a practical, evolving approach

**Looking ahead:** In parallel, Exponent developed [The Hows & Whys of Multiyear General Operating Support](#), released in January 2026. The publication explains one of CLIP's core grantmaking practices – providing multiyear, flexible funding – and offers practical guidance for funders seeking to support long-term impact through trust-based, relationship-centered approaches.

## SHARING REAL WORLD STORIES & TIMELINE INSIGHTS

The [Catalytic Philanthropy Podcast](#) continued to expand CLIP's reach by bringing real-world funder practices directly to listeners. In 2025, the series released **nine new episodes**, accounting for **1,216 of the 2,000 downloads** for the year and bringing total **lifetime downloads to 10,000**.

Through candid conversations with lean funders and community partners, the podcast shows how CLIP is practiced on the ground, highlighting how funders listen, lead, and act beyond grantmaking in response to real community needs. Episodes featured stories of funders doubling their spending during periods of widespread cuts, reshaping relationships by asking grantees, "*What do you need?*", and leveraging business and civic networks to help nonprofits build social capital.

Episodes released in the second half of 2025 included:

- [Building Alliances Between a City's Nonprofits and Its Business Community](#), Jessica Gilmore, Express Employment International
- [How a Lean Foundation Doubled Its Spending to Meet Urgent Needs](#), Ricshawn Adkins Roane, Weissberg Foundation
- [Making a Case for Foundations Spending More to Meet the Moment](#), Ricshawn Adkins Roane, Weissberg Foundation
- [Asking "What Do You Need?" Led Us to Create Capacity Building Programs](#), Lauren Scott, Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund

[Exponent Philanthropy's blog](#) continued to serve as a key platform for advancing catalytic leadership through timely insights, real-world examples, and practical guidance. In 2025, more than half of the blog's content (**21 of 39 posts**) centered on or highlighted CLIP, reflecting its growing relevance across the sector.

Blogs released in the second half of 2025 included:

- [Want To Move from Grantmaker to Changemaker? Consider the Catalytic Leadership in Philanthropy Framework](#)
- [Catalytic Leadership Virtues: A Case Study of Bold Philanthropy](#)
- [Staying the Course Toward Inclusive Philanthropy](#)
- [Catalytic Leadership Skills: A Case Study of Relationship-Driven Change](#)
- [5 Steps to Create Impactful, Mission-Driven Grantmaking](#)
- [Key Insights From the 2025 Racial Equity in Lean Foundations Publication](#)
- [Reflections on Participatory Grantmaking from a Retiring Executive Director](#)
- [Passing the Baton: How One Foundation Is Expanding Equity Through Relay Grants](#)
- [Catalytic Leadership Practices: A Case Study of Philanthropy's Role in Policy Change](#)
- [Catalytic Leadership Through Seed Grants: Lessons from the Howell Conservation Fund](#)
- [The Catalysts in Action: Connecting, Collaborating, Championing, and Advocating for Systemic Change](#)

## DEVELOPING CATALYTIC LEADERS: FROM LEARNING TO APPLICATION

Exponent's signature training program within the Catalytic Leadership Academy continued to be a cornerstone of the CLIP Initiative.

From April to June 2025, **fifteen funders**, including staff and trustees, participated in the third Intro to Catalytic Leadership cohort. The six-part program combined training, peer community, and hands-on practice to help lean funders rethink their role and apply catalytic approaches in their day-to-day work.

The program earned an overall rating of **4.43 out of 5.00**, reflecting its depth, relevance, and practical value. Participants reported increased confidence in pursuing new pathways in philanthropy and translating CLIP from concept to action within their foundations.

### **Participant reflection:**

*"This program helped me, as the executive director of a small-staffed foundation, work in partnership with my trustee to catalyze new ideas, consider gaps and opportunities, and frame conversations for future board consideration and action. For example, we are planning a convening in September 2025 of leaders and organizations in New Jersey's child welfare system. This convening is directly a result of the listening interviews and learning we did in the Intro to Catalytic Program."*

**Looking ahead:** In 2025, Exponent prepared for the 2026 [Intro to Catalytic Leadership in Philanthropy](#) program, running March 18–June 3, 2026. The program will continue to equip lean funders with practical tools, peer learning, and hands-on experience to apply catalytic leadership in community-centered, systems-level work.

## **TURNING COHORT LEARNING INTO COMMUNITY IMPACT**

Follow-up interviews with past program alumni point to lasting impact. Participants consistently report that the program reshaped how they approach philanthropy, strengthening their ability to listen more deeply, identify leverage points, and engage communities as partners in change.

### **Examples of how this learning has translated into action include:**

- **Pennsylvania:** During the program, a participant conducted listening interviews with young people that challenged assumptions about youth needs. The foundation continued this work through student surveys and is now pursuing new initiatives with community partners shaped directly by youth input.
- **Oklahoma City:** Cross-sector conversations revealed that nonprofit leaders lacked access to local business networks. In response, the foundation funded Chamber of Commerce memberships, leading to new relationships that generated financial support, volunteer expertise, and donated services.
- **California:** Listening conversations with public officials surfaced gaps in services for youth vulnerable to human trafficking. Following the program, the foundation convened nonprofit partners to form a coalition and is now fundraising to support prevention and intervention efforts.

## **THANK YOU FOR ADVANCING THIS WORK**

Your partnership as a financial supporter of the Catalytic Leadership in Philanthropy initiative has made this work possible. The progress and impact described throughout this report reflect your investment in a different way of doing philanthropy; one rooted in relationships, learning, and long-term, systems-level change.

Looking ahead to 2026, Exponent Philanthropy will continue to deepen and extend CLIP's reach through expanded leadership development, field-facing resources, and opportunities for funders to translate catalytic leadership into action in their communities. Together, we are equipping lean funders to meet the moment with clarity, confidence, and catalytic leadership.

## ABOUT EXPONENT PHILANTHROPY

Exponent Philanthropy is the nation's largest philanthropy network in the nation. With nearly 1,500 members across the U.S., we are a nationwide network of community-connected philanthropy leaders. Our members include all types of foundations, families, companies, and individuals who practice philanthropy with lean operations and limited infrastructure. Our members — no matter their asset size (ranging from less than \$1 million to over \$2 billion) — focus on investing maximum resources directly to the causes, people, and places they care about.

For 30 years, Exponent Philanthropy's work has focused on amplifying and increasing the impact of lean funders and transforming communities through informed giving. We do this by fostering a strong philanthropic network, amplifying the work of high-impact funders, sharing innovative and promising practices from across the field, and providing a robust arena for idea exchange and collaboration.

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