



ACF annual conference 2022

Courage: leadership in the next decade

Welcome speech by Carol Mack OBE, chief executive

Thank you, Joanna, for that kind introduction, and for chairing today's panel discussions

Welcome everyone!

Amazing to see you all! So much nicer than Zoom – no 'you're on mute!'

Thank you for coming today! I've a few more thank you's before I start:

- To all of our speakers here today
- To our official partners: Cazenove Capital, CCLA, Mercer, Ruffer - all of whom have stands downstairs
- And most especially to the ACF team for putting this amazing programme together – the speakers and the administration and getting us fed and watered – that's something that IS more challenging than Zoom.

About ACF

For those of you who do not know ACF that well:

- We are the leading membership association for foundations and independent grant-makers in the UK

- We have 440 members - together you hold one third of the assets of the charity sector and make over 40% of the grants given by UK foundations
- You include the full range of foundations, from small to large and operating in many different fields of grant-making – whether that be the environment, arts, international development, or medical research – to name a few.

What we provide is to enable foundations to be more than the sum of their parts. We do this by:

- Providing opportunities for you to share ideas and insights – through our networks and events and with key decision-makers
- Facilitating collaboration – our Funders Collaborative Hub supports 115 collaborative opportunities (continuing the work begun during the pandemic)
- Supporting you to embed good practice – through our Stronger Foundations initiative
- Helping you to rise to the challenges of our time – as with the Funder Commitment on Climate Change

But we need to recognise that we are doing this in a world that is volatile, constantly changing and ever more challenging

So today we choose COURAGE as the theme for our discussions. Why? Well – look around you. It is a difficult time – enough to make any right-minded person fearful.

In the three long years since we last gathered in person for our annual conference, in this very room, global events have transformed the context for our work. We have seen:

- The Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns
- The brutal murder of George Floyd and the profound reckoning that this triggered in how we prioritise, address and speak about the importance of dismantling racism and advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging
- We have seen the climate crisis reach our doorstep – with an unprecedented heatwave in the UK this year. In just four days in July in

England, this caused 2,803 older people to die prematurely. And here where we meet in London, in the same month, the fire service had its busiest day since the Blitz, dealing with multiple blazes in record-breaking temperatures.

- Abroad we have seen the climate crisis fuelling the displacement of many people. In Pakistan recently devastating floods put one third of the country under water.
- And we have seen several wars – with the war in Ukraine leading to an energy crisis
- And now we see a cost of living crisis – combined with a predicted recession, where many people are expected to be pushed further into poverty.

And all of this at a time when government funding for public services will stay the same at best and more likely contract in the coming years.

It's not a pretty picture. It can feel very bleak. And that is why our hope and yes, our courage is essential. Foundations cannot hope to plug the spending gaps and solve all of the problems – they are simply too large and we have no magic wand –but we can play an important role in responding to the needs of today AND in sowing the seeds for change – for a better future.

As funders, you are telling us that charities and community groups who are working with those that are affected most negatively – on the frontline - are having to constantly adapt, change and do more with less... this is their norm.

They are having to deal with unprecedented levels of need – quite frankly, demand that they just cannot meet.

In addition – they, and many other organisations you fund – whether in the arts, in the health sector or in education and research – many of them:

- Have a workforce or volunteers that are tired and increasingly burnt out and ever more difficult to retain and recruit
- And they are fearful about what is to come this winter - with rising costs and falling revenues.

For some, simply keeping the show on the road and the wheels turning takes an inordinate amount of courage.

As foundations, you are not immune to these challenges of complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability. If you have investments, they have been volatile. Depending on your funding area, you may also be dealing with unprecedented levels of need – and this also has an impact on your workforce.

But for most – you have resource, the challenge is about how best to use it.

What does courage mean in this context? What does courageous foundation leadership look like?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines courage as: *mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand difficulty, fear or danger*. While the Cambridge dictionary has: *the ability to control your fear in a difficult or dangerous situation*.

Feel the fear and do it anyway – seems to be the gist.

So far, so theoretical. What does it look like in reality for us as a sector.

Well, it takes courage to:

Lean into tough conversations – rather than avoiding them – especially when you are having to navigate situations that are entirely new to you.

You need courage to **take risks** and be willing to **learn and reset after failures** – rather than being paralysed by fear or sticking to what you have always done, because this feels safer even if in reality it isn't the 'safe' option.

And you need courage to **take decisions that feel uncomfortable** – especially if they risk the reputation of your foundation or of yourself – because you are not sure how they will be received.

The TED-talker and researcher [Brené Brown](#) captures some of this when she pleads for leaders to recognise the importance of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable – feeling uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure – that unstable feeling when we step out of our comfort zone or do something

that forces us to loosen control. Brown's research points to this as a strength of leadership and not a weakness – a pre-condition for creativity and change as well as empathy and hope. All much needed at the current time.

Foundations have a unique place in civil society

You have incredible freedoms to say and do what you want as organisations – limited only by accountability to your charitable objectives and charity law.

And foundations combine this independence with **power and with privilege**

Power because they have the ability to influence and make decisions that impact others; the capacity to exercise control on who has access to your resources; and

Privilege because of the advantages and benefits foundations have been granted compared to other actors in wider civil society.

The author and activist [Edgar Villanueva](#) argues that a key source of foundations' power and privilege is your money...

AND he goes on to say that money is the medicine that philanthropy has to address the issues we care about or as he puts it - far more poetically - for "restoring balance and healing our divides".

But money, in itself, can achieve nothing. It's the choices we make to spend and invest it that give it value.

So foundations as organisations have:

- Independence
- Power and privilege
- Money as our medicine to deliver change.

Overlay that with strong values that drive you as leaders and organisations and we have, I would argue, the near perfect conditions to be courageous in a way that can disrupt and lead to change for the better and to preserve what's important about the now.

Many of you are already doing this.

We have seen examples of courage

We have seen funders leaning into some tough conversations – in a way they have not done before, being transparent about what they are doing and courageous about inviting others to hold them to account.

Later today – you can hear from UnLtd who are doing just this – they are leading a breakout session on what they've learned about embedding equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging in their work.

We have seen courageous risk taking:

Funders beginning to question and dismantle the way they have done things in the past and developing a more value-based approach to their work - emphasising trust, transparency, treating those they fund as partners (not just recipients).

You can hear from several funders about this in our breakouts – [Calouste Gulbenkian](#) and [Local Trust](#) on the power of co-creation and [Colyer-Ferguson Charitable Trust](#) with [Kent Community Foundation](#) on investing in relationships and trust.

We have seen greater honesty about mistakes:

Prompted by the resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter we have seen a number of foundations recognising their history and place in profiting from racist systems – including slavery – and being honest and open about this.

Unpicking history can feel uncomfortable and we have a breakout session on that this afternoon from [John Ellerman Foundation](#) and others.

And, finally, we have seen:

Examples of more courageous and authentic leadership – bringing ourselves to work, recognising where our own background and experiences may make us part of the problem, and finding ways to shift resources and decisions to organisations and individuals who are closer to the communities you want to reach as funders

Later on, [Guy's and St Thomas Foundation](#) are sharing how they are doing this.

It feels like now is a pivotal moment for foundations – where over the next 10 years we can build on this courage and leadership with hope or we can fall back to our comfort zone in the onslaught of crisis after crisis and fail to seize the potential of this moment.

My hope and ambition for us as a sector is that we can build on the good work we have begun and be ever more courageous and brave as we do so. To use our independence, money, power with a strong values driven approach. To be courageous with our ideas and thinking; courageous about how we fund, what we fund, and courageous how we lead and work with others.

How can ACF support you to build on these strong foundations?

Our new five year strategy comes into effect next year – many of you have helped us shape this with your thoughts and ideas – and I'm so grateful for your insights.

Our purpose will be to strengthen trusts and foundations individually and collectively to rise to the challenges of our times.

Courage is a skill that can be learned. Brené Brown, that expert on courage says; *It's like a muscle, exercise it regularly – with each decision you make and over time, year after year you will see what difference you have made*

ACF will strive to help you exercise this muscle.

We will provide brave spaces for you to test your ideas and have uncomfortable conversations, work with one another, take risk and share failures as well as the learning this has led to.

We want to support a more diverse sector and yes, we want to celebrate its successes – your successes!

It doesn't matter what the size of your foundation, it doesn't matter what your starting point is, you, our members, are living proof that you can

seize the potential of the moment, move forward and make the changes we all need to make to keep up with a constantly shifting context.

This conference is capturing where we are today and will, I hope, support some deep thinking and connections for us all – to help us prepare in a spirit of hope and courage for whatever the future may throw at us

Thank you!

Have a wonderful day!