

Southeastern Council of Foundations Newsletter
July 2008

Grassroots Philanthropy is a treasury of wisdom thoughtfully distilled from many years of experience and laced with wit and common sense. It should be required reading for every first-time foundation employee and board member.

Bill Somerville's insights and perceptions are especially valuable for the staff and boards of small-to-medium sized foundations, especially those with a local or regional focus. However, even those women and men associated with the super novas of organized philanthropy can benefit from Somerville's pointed reminders about the importance of careful listening and relationship- building before making funding decisions as well as the systematic eradication of arrogance in all dealings with grantseekers.

Somerville places high value on intuition, trust, and risk-taking, and he is "death" on unnecessary paper-pushing and overlong meetings. He also convincingly argues that all foundation program staffers should spend one-third of their working hours "on the street," building personal relationships with knowledgeable nonprofit leaders and public officials (e.g., juvenile court judges) and actively looking for agencies and individuals making a positive difference in their communities.

The author makes his points with good stories and well-targeted illustrations. (He has hundreds of them, and I only wish he would have shared a few more.)

The book's subtitle is "Field Notes of a Maverick Grantmaker," and a few of Somerville's observations may be anathema to some of his colleagues. His retort to their objections, I suspect, would be to cite their very discomfort as evidence of the field's all-too-prevalent stuffiness, overly cautionary nature, and self-protective bureaucracy.

At the heart of the reformation that Somerville would like the world of organized philanthropy to embrace is his personal passion to deliver charitable resources to those in greatest need in a timely, efficient, impactful fashion and thereby to bring life-saving changers to individuals, institutios, neighborhoods, and communities.

Toward the end of his book, Somerville devotes a brief section to a critique of community foundations. He himself was the creative CEO of a successful community foundation for many years, and he has provided consultation to hundreds of others. For that reason it's my hope that he will use this section as the impetus for another book on the subject of these important philanthropic institutions.

I take issue with only one of Somerville's contentions: the concept that foundations should delegate a significant portion of their grantmaking decisions to their CEOs. It's easy to understand why he feels that way. He himself is such a talented and innovative grantmaker that he has justified other people's faith in him. However, before I'd be ready to extend that level of trust to other CEOs, I would first insist that they read his book and perhaps serve an internship under his tutelage.

Martin C. Lehfeltd
President
Southeastern Council of Foundations

(In the spirit of self-disclosure, it should be noted that this reviewer has known and admired Bill Somerville's iconoclastic approach to philanthropy since the two of them first met in 1986.)