

Opinion, March 2010

### **Power Corrupts; Absolutely**

A recent article from *The Economist* (Jan 21st print edition) may be very instructive to philanthropists. Recent research explores the hypocritical sense of entitlement and the moral pliability that seems to follow people who exercise power. Researchers in the Netherlands and the United States designed several experiments to elicit states of power and powerlessness in the minds of volunteers and then they were tested for their moral flexibility in over-reporting travel expenses at work. The results seem to confirm the ancient maxim that power corrupts and that it promotes a hypocritical tendency to hold other people to a higher standard than oneself. Powerful people are quick to condemn the transgressions of others before considering their own.

These findings are not particularly surprising. However, the research team went on to observe that powerful people who have been caught in their transgressions show few signs of contrition. It seems that powerful people not only abuse the system freely and hold others (less powerful) to a higher standard, they also feel entitled to abuse it. When the presence of power was viewed as justified by the powerful, they assumed it was even their right to take what they want.

This sense of entitlement explains why powerful people in high office misbehave. Powerful people do not break the rules simply because they can but because they genuinely believe they have a right to do so. The rules simply do not apply to the powerful. In the absence of this sense of entitlement, abuse is less likely.

Consider the imbalance of power in the relationship between philanthropists and grant recipients otherwise known as "the golden rule". He who has the gold, rules. As an example, the hypocrisy of entitlement can be observed among funders who demand that their grantees collaborate to reduce costs while funders themselves rarely collaborate with other funders to boost their impact. Do we hold others to a higher standard than ourselves? Do we in essence take advantage of our less powerful grantees because we feel entitled to do so?

Founding philanthropists who earned the original corpus of their endowments may feel most acutely justified in their power over grantees. Perhaps they feel it is their right to dictate the myriad conditions they attach to their grants (even when those conditions are unproven). Given the important findings of this recent research, it seems that the least we can do is to examine the things about which we feel entitled.