

Investing in Transformative Ideas

An Interview with Darren Walker, President, Ford Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Darren Walker is President of the Ford Foundation, a \$16 billion international social justice philanthropy. He is a member of the Reimagining New York Commission and co-chair of NYC Census 2020. He chaired the philanthropy committee that brought a resolution to the city of Detroit's historic bankruptcy. Before joining the Ford Foundation, Walker was vice president at Rockefeller Foundation, overseeing global and domestic programs. In the 1990s, he was COO of the Abyssinian Development Corporation, Harlem's largest community development organization. Walker co-chairs New York City's Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, and has served on the Independent Commission on New York City Criminal Justice and Incarceration Reform and the UN International Labour Organization Global Commission on the Future of Work. He co-founded both the US Impact Investing Alliance and the Presidents' Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy and is a founding member of the Board Diversity Action Alliance. He serves on many boards, including Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the National Gallery of Art, Carnegie Hall, the High Line, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture. In the summer of 2020, he was appointed to the boards of Block, Inc. and Ralph Lauren. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and is the recipient of 16 honorary degrees and university awards, including Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Medal. He has been included on numerous leadership lists: Time's annual 100 Most Influential People, Rolling Stone's 25 People Shaping the Future, Fast Company's Most Creative People in Business, Ebony's Power 100, and Out magazine's Power 50. Most recently, Walker was named Wall Street Journal's 2020 Philanthropy Innovator. Educated exclusively in public schools, Walker was a member of the first Head Start class in 1965 and received BA, BS, and JD degrees from the University of Texas at Austin.



Darren Walker

FOUNDATION BRIEF Ford Foundation (fordfoundation.org) is the third largest philanthropy in the United States with over \$16 billion in assets and \$600 million in annual giving. The Foundation operates worldwide with offices in Asia, Africa, and Central and South America. Across eight decades, the foundation's mission has been to reduce poverty and injustice, strengthen democratic values, promote international cooperation, and advance human achievement.

Will you highlight the history and heritage of the Ford Foundation and how you define its mission?

For the past eight decades, the Ford Foundation has been working toward its mission to end poverty and fight inequality in all its forms. Around the world, too many people are excluded

from the civic, social and economic institutions that shape their lives. We see this inequity as the defining challenge of our time and addressing it is at the core of everything we do.

Will you provide an overview of the Ford Foundation's work and key areas of focus?

Ford challenges inequality by investing in transformative ideas, institutions and individuals fighting for social justice around the world. To address inequality in all its forms, we invest and make grants in nine interconnected areas: civic engagement and government, creativity and free expression, disability inclusion, future of work(ers), gender, racial and economic justice, international cooperation and global governance, mission investments, natural resources and climate change, and technology and society. We believe that real change is possible at the intersection of these nine program areas.

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How did the Ford Foundation adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

When the pandemic hit, we were all uprooted from the status quo and had to adjust our ideas about the workplace. At Ford, our in-office work style was traditional, and though we did not have remote work options before the pandemic, we were lucky enough to have had the systems in place to transition to remote work fairly easily.

Beyond being able to get the work done, we had to ensure we were able to get the work done well, which meant providing our employees and partners with the resources they needed to be successful in an uncertain environment. We implemented a range of work policies to adjust to the pandemic, to avoid burnout, and to protect employees’ physical and mental well-being. Moving forward we’ll be implementing a hybrid model, building on what we’ve learned since we made the transition to remote work.

How proud are you to see the resilience of your team during this unprecedented time?

Over the past two years, I have been inspired and motivated by my colleagues at the Ford Foundation for their dedication to their work and their commitment to finding new and impactful ways to better support our partners all around the world who are working to fight injustice and inequality.

Despite all of the unforeseen challenges that have arisen since 2020, it has been encouraging to see my colleagues in our offices across the world continue to push forward, supporting

the individuals, institutions and ideas fighting for positive change at a critical time in history. Thanks to the team’s continued efforts and the foundation’s historic \$1 billion social bond, we were able to expedite and expand our work, doubling our grantmaking in 2020-2021.

How important is it for the Ford Foundation to build a diverse and inclusive workforce to bring diverse perspectives and experiences to the table when addressing global issues?

As a foundation with offices all over the world, we take a global lens in everything we do. It’s been made abundantly clear over the past two years that fostering open channels of communication is crucial, and in order to do that effectively we must be in sync with our global partners.

Internally, we know that what may work in our New York Office might not work for our team in Colombia, or South Africa, so we keep our ears closely to the ground, keeping in close contact with our international colleagues to ensure that we take thoughtful steps that are in the best interest of our employees and our organization as a whole.

These fundamental principles apply directly to our grantmaking work and how we engage with and support our external partners. We believe that trusting the experts with first-hand, on the ground knowledge is the best way to ensure success.

How critical are metrics to track the impact of the Ford Foundation’s work?

As we work to strengthen our nonprofit partners and support their work across the globe,

it’s important to determine a baseline to assess where we are and set targets for where we’ll be headed. We set these goals in partnership with our grantees – giving them the resources and flexibility they need to grow stronger and more effective at reaching the communities they serve.

We know that the most effective approach to good grantmaking is to trust grantees to use funding in a way that addresses the issues they’re trying to solve. We’ve seen success taking this approach to our funding and know that the best way to make an impact is through building a foundation of trust and empowerment.

The world is facing a series of crises, among them public health, social justice, climate change and poverty. What do you see as the role that philanthropy needs to play to meet this moment?

In the midst of concurrent and converging global crises, it’s clearer than ever that we face a moral and existential imperative to address the root causes of these widespread social issues. Philanthropy has the opportunity and, frankly, the obligation to deploy much needed resources to those around the world who are not only directly impacted by these problems, but are taking a first-hand approach in solving them.

What do you see as the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?

When faced with any kind of uncertainty or upheaval, we instinctively look to our leaders – to the people we respect and admire, who call on us to be and do better. We expect effective leaders to be competent, compassionate, honest, and forward thinking, especially in times of crisis.

These are values that I aspire to in my own work and try to help foster in others. I’m fortunate to be backed by an incredibly talented team, and I know that it’s crucial to trust the people around us, leaning into their deep well of knowledge and working together to achieve the best possible outcome so we can move forward together toward a common goal.

Did you know early on that you had a passion for this type of work and that this is how you wanted to focus your career?

While I have had a diverse career across different industries, it has always been clear to me that I wanted to be in a place where I could give back and have an impact. It is an immense privilege being able to wake up every morning and have the opportunity to work alongside people who inspire me and support work that is both gratifying and impactful.

You are known to be an optimistic person. During this difficult and uncertain time, what would you say to young people who are deeply concerned and uncertain about the future?

Everyone has the ability to create positive change by choosing to take action, no matter how big or small, that works toward solutions. If we contribute to building a better future by getting involved in our communities or supporting causes that matter to us, we each can do our part to make sure that we leave the world in better shape than we found it. ●