

Mission, results, impact, engagement drive Michele Courton Brown

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Philanthropy, according to Bank of America Philanthropic Management's national practice director, Michele Courton Brown, whether personally or in her corporate work, should be mission-oriented and results-driven.

"With a sense of what you would like to achieve through your philanthropic gifts, you have the ability, as you execute your philanthropic plan, to determine the measurable impact and the social return on your investment you'd like to see," she says.

"I think of charitable giving as a philanthropic investment from which you hope to see some positive change, and that means being thoughtful about how you give, where you give and understanding the mission, the vision and how the charity executes its work before you choose to invest."

It's a philosophy that Courton Brown has followed as head of several corporate charitable foundations and one that she continues in her role today.

It's also the guiding principal in her own community service, particularly in light of a second guidepost: engagement. "The invaluable gift of time and talent cannot be underrated," she says.

Going on her 16th year at Bank of America and its legacy banks, Courton Brown now works out of the Boston office and advises mass affluent and high net worth clients in their philanthropic endeavors.

Courton Brown works with some 175 associates in the Bank of America Philanthropic Management group around the country who provide individuals, families, private foundations and institutions with investment, planned giving, charitable management and administrative services as well as strategic advice in achieving a chosen mission while aligning financial and charitable objectives.

The Bank of America Philanthropic Management group manages more than 10,000 client relationships nationwide and more than \$35 billion in assets as of Sept. 1, 2007.

Courton Brown is responsible for advising key clients, collaborating with colleagues in client management and overseeing the development of tools and services to meet clients' diverse and ever changing needs. She also serves as a thought leader on earmarking philanthropic giving for social change.

“What I love about philanthropy is that the nonprofit community – both funders and nonprofits – is so solution oriented. I see in our clients a deep desire to do the right thing in society. They have different views about how to get that done. I get to see the tapestry of their priorities and interests woven right in front of me.”

Courton Brown started her career in banking at Connecticut National Bank, a Bank of America legacy bank, before transferring to Travelers Insurance Companies in Hartford, Conn., to work in corporate investments. It wasn't until she was tapped to serve at the local United Way for its “loaned executive” program that she found her calling.

Temporarily relieved of her formal work duties, Courton Brown spent four months helping launch and manage campaigns, soliciting CEOs for corporate gifts, giving speeches and encouraging people to give.

“Through that experience, I had a career transformation,” she says. “I began networking within my company and by serendipity met the president of the corporate foundation. We had an instant connection. There was a job opening and I went for it.”

Once at the foundation, Courton Brown quickly performed her primary work and used her remaining available time to learn more about corporate philanthropy.

Through her mentor there, she learned that corporate philanthropy was more than the grip-and-grin photo, “but about the power a company could unleash by galvanizing employees around volunteerism, providing thought leadership through executives who served on nonprofit boards, and employing and engaging their public policy engines to effect social change.”

Over the next several years, Courton Brown was promoted into new roles until she became the executive director of the Travelers Insurance Companies Foundation.

In 1992, Courton Brown moved to Boston to continue her role in corporate philanthropy at Bank of Boston, which merged to become BankBoston, where she was director of corporate contributions.

Following the FleetBoston Financial merger, Courton Brown became the organization's first foundation president, leading a highly mission-oriented grant-making program. In 2003, a year before the Bank of America acquisition, her role transitioned to philanthropic management services.

“I feel privileged that I have had the opportunity, in one company, to translate the experiences I harnessed running the corporate foundation to the business side, where I partner and work with our clients and help them achieve their philanthropic goals,” she says.

The banking pieces were not new to Courton Brown in her latest role, but what has been most interesting is the increased use of alternative investments, such as hedge funds, by nonprofits and the creativity in individual foundation strategies.

Courton Brown has a unique vantage point to see giving trends develop among Bank of America's mass affluent, wealthy and ultra-wealthy clients, and to respond to these trends with strategies and solutions that help these individuals achieve their philanthropic missions.

For instance, donor-advised funds are proliferating and entrepreneurial philanthropy is on the rise, with local nonprofit models going national and even international, Courton Brown points out.

The new wave of nonprofit entrepreneurs is a particularly intriguing discussion point for Courton Brown in the book, “Just Money: A Critique of Contemporary American Philanthropy,” that she co-authored in 2004.

“Whether nonprofits are modeling behaviors seen in the venture industry or as a result of the dot-com boom, we're seeing more entrepreneurship in philanthropy and we have interesting philanthropic leaders who are driving the discussion in ways that are quite remarkable,” she says.

“Philanthropists are identifying issues and saying, ‘what would it cost to eliminate the problem?’ and ‘let’s do the due diligence to quantify the issue’ and ‘let’s put the money behind that and resolve that issue.’ I think that’s exciting.”

The other piece of modern philanthropy that impresses Courton Brown is the level of engagement on boards and in volunteering in the area.

In fact, a study that Bank of America commissioned with The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University in 2006 revealed that individual volunteerism was linked to charitable giving. Over the course of this year, Courton Brown will serve as a thought leader behind the national rollout of the “Portraits of Donors,” a new report that provides a unique look at specific behavioral patterns and motivations among 12 types of the nation’s wealthiest donors.

“I’m looking forward to having some rich dialogue around the country with clients, nonprofit organizations, audiences large and small, to unveil our findings, share our expertise and be part of the dialogue about the changing face of philanthropy,” she says.

Courton Brown, personally, is playing her part in charitable engagement. She serves on numerous boards, including chair of Roxbury Community College, chair of The Chestnut Hill School and trustee of Faulkner Hospital, Boys and Girls Club of Boston, The Partnership and YouthBuild USA.

Courton Brown is also energized to be an instrumental player in thought leadership at a time when the next generation will see a transfer of \$41 trillion in wealth, according to the latest estimates from the Social Welfare Research Institute at **Boston College** and referring to a 55-year period from 1998 through 2052.

“If you think of a small percentage of those assets being invested in the nonprofit community, that can have a transformative impact on our society,” she says.