Susan Hockenberry and Kathleen Enright work at opposite ends of the philanthropic sector, and they lead very different organizations. They don’t know one another, but their positions on ethics, effectiveness and accountability were knitted together in much of the Endowments’ work in these areas last year.

Hockenberry is executive director of western Pennsylvania’s Local Government Academy, one of hundreds of nonprofit organizations that shared in the more than $57 million in Endowments grants distributed throughout the region last year. Its superb ethics-effectiveness training program for public officials is why it has been a grantee since 1993.

Enright is executive director of Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, a national group dedicated to making foundations more effective in the ways in which they relate to grantees and to the nonprofit field. Embedded in the organization’s various programs is the principle that grant makers concerned with evaluating their impact in the community are likely to pay more attention to ethics and accountability issues.

As an active member of GEO and a grantor of the Local Government Academy, the Endowments, I believe, is playing a leadership role in the ethics-accountability field, which is itself growing in importance in the foundation world.

At the academy, newly elected officials are put through 10 courses that cover the basics of running municipalities — finances, human resources, law, public safety, planning — and a specific session on ethics. But the underpinnings of the entire program are ethics, transparency, evaluation and effective decision making.

“It’s hard for people to see immediately that our session on stormwater management has an ethics component, but it does,” says Hockenberry. “That’s on purpose. We realize that we have what amounts to a teachable moment with these officials. Telling them we’re going to lecture them on ethics alone is like yelling ‘Eat your vegetables!’ ”

Instead, the vegetables get mixed in with the meat and potatoes of governance. What officials discover, says Hockenberry, is that “being effective in office means paying attention to a set of shared, community-based ethics.”

The Local Government Academy is just one of dozens of grantees that Endowments program staff identified and supported last year as strong ethics-effectiveness advocates.

We have made an internal commitment to be a national leader in the philanthropic sector on these values, and we realize that achieving that requires that we promote them through our grantees.

As the new chair of the national Council on Foundations, I am particularly aware of our need to pay attention to the other end of the philanthropic pipeline and to live up to the same ethics-effectiveness code. Certainly, the ethical misbehaviors in recent years by some high-profile foundations make that clear.

That’s why the words of Enright and the services of GEO have been especially valuable to the Endowments and to the field as a whole.

Like Hockenberry, Enright also draws a direct line between the willingness of a foundation to engage in honest self-evaluation and outside assessment of effectiveness and ethical behavior.

“Grant makers often expect their grantees to exhibit behaviors that they themselves do not model,” Enright wrote in last year’s May-June issue of Foundation News & Commentary magazine. She cited an Urban Institute study that found “a substantial number of foundations failing to engage in practices that, by their own standards, are important to effectiveness.”

The Endowments took this message to heart last year and contracted with a partner organization, the Center for Effective Philanthropy, to conduct a grantee perception survey. While we have done these in the past, this was the first in which we compared our results with those of other foundations. As part of walking the walk with our grantees and the public, we will be posting the results of the survey on our Web site in the future.

This is just one of the ways in which we intend to measure our own effectiveness and improve our accountability to the public. But in the process of “learning to eat our vegetables,” we take some caution from Howard Heinz Endowment Chairman Teresa Heinz. In a speech at the recent Council on Foundations conference in Pittsburgh, she cautioned the field to avoid becoming “one colossal, collective bore” in the process of adopting these values. They are only worthwhile, she said, to the extent that they give us the credibility to lead and “give others that spark, that idea or vision that can change lives.”

Susan Hockenberry executive director, Local Government Academy

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