Practical Ways Funders and Grantees Can Work Better Together

Turning Obstacles into Opportunities by Making Small Changes

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Overview

Grantmakers and grantseekers work hard at furthering their missions. It might seem like they have opposite jobs, but in reality, they are both grant managers. Grant writers tell their organization's story to communicate the need for funds and grantmakers must decide which organization is the best fit. Each face frustrating obstacles, such as:

- Lack of Clear Communication
- Too Much Information
- Lack of Knowledge Share

Making things easier for both, does not need to be a complicated or expensive endeavor – small changes can positively impact these obstacles.

Creating transparency, simplifying processes, or setting systems in place to ensure continuity are just a few examples of the simple steps that can be taken to ensure these obstacles don't become road blocks to the success of the mission.

Obstacles to Success

Lack of Clear Communication

What are the requirements for this grant? How do I apply for it? When is the grant application due? How and when will I know if I've been approved for the grant? Can I call someone to ask questions? What kind of follow up will be required if we are approved for funding?

> *Grantseekers find tremendous variability in expectations, communications, timeline, and foundation staff availability. Each time a nonprofit engages with a new potential funder, they enter mysterious and unpredictable terrain.*
>
> ~*Drowning in Paperwork*, a report from *Project Streamline*

An easy way to find and understand information, such as a FAQ page on a foundation's website, can help clear up some of the questions grantseekers have. Many foundations already use a page like this and have had luck in clearing up questions and saving time for both themselves and their applicants.

Kristen Cullen – *Foundation Associate for the HRK Foundation* – notes that this practice in transparency helps set expectations about whether or not a grantseeker's organization fits within their guidelines:

> *Out of respect to grantseekers, I would suggest to other grantmakers that they make qualification criteria transparent and easily available. It will cut down on wasted time for both grantmakers and grant writers.*

The HRK Foundation's website offers simple, clear information about their purpose, their grant guidelines, and specific deadlines for their grant cycles.

As another example, The Jewish Federation of St. Louis gives a clear picture of what applicants should expect in the Planning and Allocations section of their website. How their funds are allocated, what their priorities are, how their application and review process works, their timeline for grant cycles, useful resources, and information about the foundation's leadership is all found here. This is the type of page an applicant can bookmark and refer back to for almost any of their questions through the application and review processes.

Although written as a resource for grantseekers, Foundation Center's *Guide to Funding Research* can give grantmakers insight into some of the questions applicants might have and how to best present the answers. The easier it is for grantseekers to find answers to their questions, the more time is reserved for furthering the mission.

Suzi Berget White – a grant writer for the *Property and Environment Research Center in Bozeman, MT* – says she appreciates the transparency some organizations have implemented in communicating information:

> *It helps me as the grant writer learn more about the organization and their funding priorities, and it informs me if I am even suitable for applying for a grant from that organization before I invest a lot of time filling out an application.*

Andy Verhoff – *History Fund Grant Manager and Ohio Historical Marker Coordinator for the Ohio History Connection* – has taken his organization's communication process even a step further.

In his recent blog post for Foundant Technologies on transparency, Andy explained how they've worked to improve the application process through a series of webinars aimed at fostering transparency and eliminating confusion. He writes:

> *Each History Fund Help webinar is 90 minutes long and consists of three sections. The first is an overview of the History Fund: what it is, how it's funded, what kinds of organizations are eligible to apply, what kinds of projects the Fund will support, as well as grant sizes, project periods, and other stipulations. The second part is the meat of the webinar. We hopscotch through the actual application, covering all seven sections. The third section and finale of the webinar is Q & A time. The questions we receive are good gauge of how well we've explained some concepts and which ones require more attention*

~*Crowdsourcing, Transparency, & Training: Using Webinars to Increase Accessibility & Accountability* by Andy Verhoff

This is one example of getting creative with communications and finding a better way to make things more transparent. But the need for transparency goes both ways. This is part of the reason grant applications tend to be so different from one organization to another – each funder needs to understand the *real* story and how the resources they provide will be used to make an impact.

It's also up to the grantseeker to understand what it means to be "grant ready," by doing thorough research and keeping focused on opportunities where there is mission alignment. This includes taking the time to find online resources provided, like webinars or eligibility requirements. If these resources are not available or are incomplete, it's important to be available via phone or email – not to mention, much appreciated by grantseekers.

Too Much Information

> *It is amazing how many different questions are asked to get at the same information. Each grantor seems to have a slight twist on each question that prevents a grant writer from being able to copy and paste from one grant request to the next.*
>
> ~Carlyn Blake – *Executive Director of Ūsful Glassworks Inc.* Boise, ID

Grantseeking takes time, and researching and keeping track of grant opportunities is only part of it. Writing the grant proposals, tracking history, and reporting after the fact all require resources. And repetitive questions or information requested in different formats can feel like a drain on a grant writer's time. More importantly, it can lead to workarounds, short cuts, and mistakes that cost even more resources to fix.

> *Because foundations often require budgets in a particular format, or ask to see expenses broken down in specific ways, many nonprofit organizations keep multiple versions of their budgets. The potential for errors is heightened every time a budget is translated into a new format.*
>
> ~*Drowning in Paperwork*, a report from *Project Streamline*

Cullen explains:

> *We had a very lengthy application in part because we wanted to pull small amounts of information for reporting, and then we wanted an elaborate explanation later in the application. I can see where this would be frustrating. When responding to applicants, I typically just explained this to them. I found it really cumbersome to read the applications because they were lengthy and there were duplicate answers. I was only reading…imagine writing!*
>
> *We've tried to get to the bottom of what we really need to know so we don't put too much burden on the applicant. At the same time, we don't want to make the application lack substance. We try to balance this so the application can tell the applicant's story and give us the details we need to evaluate.*

Instead of both sides getting frustrated with the way the other is handling the process, look at this as an opportunity to be creative and find a solution that might save time and help everyone in reaching their goals.

It’s important to take a close look at the current application and ask if there are ways to make it easier and less time consuming. To gain perspective into what it’s really like for applicants, it might make sense for grantmakers to fill out their own application. What if simply doing this could save each applicant, and potentially each reviewer, just one hour?

In their Due Diligence guide, Project Streamline states:

> *As with everything in grantmaking, there’s always more you could do. But is it necessary? Due diligence can be right sized. In addition to requiring less, grantmakers can also stage requirements so that only grantseekers with a very good chance of being funded are asked to provide full due diligence information. It takes your staff resources to ask for, follow up on, file, and handle all of these documents. Asking for unnecessary paperwork drains resources not only from your grantseekers, but also from your own grantmaking organization.*

~*Due Diligence*, a guide from *Project Streamline*

Lack of Knowledge Share

Where does your institutional knowledge sit? If one member of the staff is in charge of each review process for the organization and is all of a sudden gone, how easy will it be for someone else to step in and take over?

Is information the new person will need stored on a hard drive? Where did the previous person save those files? Is there a file sharing system or repository in place? In order to create consistency during turnover, the new person needs to step into this role as seamlessly as possible. It’s important they have access to things like deadlines, contacts, reasons for past denials, and what each organization promises to deliver.

By taking this information out of heads and hard drives, and making it institutional it becomes easier for a new person to step in, with the tools and information necessary to succeed in their role.

Bridget Wilkinson – *Foundation Manager for the Bozeman Area Community Foundation* – discusses her transition in a recent blog post for Foundant Technologies:

> *With each new career pursued in a lifetime, there is usually a steep learning curve. In September of 2013, I was hired as the first Foundation Manager of the Bozeman Area Community Foundation. I was hired to enable the foundation to become more proactive leaders and to establish programs that serve donors and the nonprofit sector –*

all of which was new to me. When my first grant cycle rolled around, I was worried that I would not have the capacity to manage it effectively, even with our new grants management system. I am grateful that our Board of Directors had the foresight to learn about and implement new software that took this possibility of transition into consideration. When we take on new roles or careers, it's important to find ways to simplify all the new tasks and systems.

~*Learning to Simplify* by Bridget Wilkinson

Both funders and nonprofits can work to ease the burden of staff turnover, such as setting tools and systems in place for knowledge sharing or ensuring that there is always a point of contact who can be reached by phone or email when questions arise.

And this is not just important in the case of turnover. It's important to keep an eye on continual improvement. Keeping your institutional knowledge easily accessible and systems in place that everyone in the organization are familiar with will help identify areas that are causing problems, things that can be improved upon, and ways you'll be able to scale as your organization grows and changes over time.

Simple Steps to Success

There's no need to reinvent the wheel. Find small things that can be done now, and over time they will make a large impact. Just take it one step at a time. Some ideas grantmakers can use are listed below. Hopefully these will help get you started on the path to improve your process.

- Create one webpage or PDF that will clearly outline expectations and requirements for grant applicants.
- Update that resource as new questions arise or when requirements change.
- Fill out your own application to get a feel for what it's really like. Then simplify it where you can.
- If lengthy or repetitive portions of the application are necessary, explain this upfront to your applicants.
- Set systems in place to ease the burden of staff turnover.
- Find a system for document sharing.
- As tasks are being worked on, take time to document the steps so that someone stepping in to the position can pick up where their successor left off.

- Show respect for your applicants by being transparent with your grant requirements and doing your best to streamline your application process so it doesn't take them any extra time than necessary.

Project Streamline, an effort lead by Grant Manager's Network and their partners, aims "to help grantmakers understand and reduce the burden of application and reporting on their nonprofit partners, while still getting the information they need to make good grantmaking decisions". The project's research suggests beginning with:

> ***Start Fresh*** *Take a fresh look at your organization's application and reporting requirements. Conduct a rigorous assessment of what kind of information is really needed to make grantmaking decisions. Ask: Are we really going to use this? Is there another way we can get it? Have we sufficiently explained to our grantees why we need it?*

Project Streamline also offers a Grantmaker Assessment Tool to help you "compare your practices to those of other funders and get a report on the effectiveness of your practices". This might be the perfect starting point for your organization to find out what the obstacles are in your process and how you can get on the path to simplifying the process for everyone.

While it's important for grantmakers to look at resources such as Project Streamline and use them to improve the applicant experience, it's also just as important for grantseekers to understand *why* grantmakers do things a certain way; and to look for ways they can streamline their own processes.

> *Efficient and effective practices ensure that you direct the maximum amount of resources to the mission – both yours and your grantees'. And sound practices and controls increase the public's confidence in private sector philanthropy, enabling the field to continue its good work (gmnetwork.org/practicesmatter).*
>
> *~Project Streamline*

Making things easier isn't just the grantmaker's responsibility. Here are some ideas of simple steps grantseekers can take to better align their mission with that of their funders.

- Know what it means to be "grant ready." (Check out Smartegrant's Grant Readiness Assessment Tool.)
- Make sure you do your research and focus on finding opportunities where there is a match with your missions.
- Set systems in place to ease the burden of staff turnover.

- Invest in tools and systems that protect your institutional knowledge and allow you to easily share with others.
- Be transparent with funders. Hearing the *real* facts from you is better than any other alternative.
- Attend any webinars or information sessions the funder provides to help you be successful.
- Show respect for your funders by being prompt with your grants reports and provide them in the format requested.
- Keep your GuideStar Exchange profile as up to date as possible.
- Give yourself enough time to apply and respond if there are any follow up questions.

Summary

Roadblocks don't need to stay that way. By looking for small things that make a difference, grant managers can have an impact on philanthropy overall.

Grantmakers can give their applicants confidence by creating transparency and simplifying their processes. Grantseekers can save themselves and their funders' time by doing thorough research, planning for staff turnover, and providing information in the required format.

The ultimate goal is to balance resources so they can offer the largest impact on the overall mission. By finding ways to work together better, more efficiently, and to promote mutual understanding and trust - funders and nonprofits can improve their relationships and increase the chance of achieving shared outcomes.

Resources

Drowning in Paperwork:
http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/drowninginpaperwork.pdf

HRK Foundation: http://www.hrkfoundation.org/index.html

Jewish Federation of St. Louis: http://www.jfedstl.org/allocations/

Foundation Center *Guide for Funding Research*:
http://foundationcenter.org/getstarted/tutorials/gfr/index.html

Crowdsourcing, Transparency, & Training: Using Webinars to increase accessibility & Accountability: http://www.foundant.com/wp/blog/crowdsourcing-transparency-training-using-webinars-to-increase-accessibility-accountability/

Foundation Center's Common Grant Application Page:
http://foundationcenter.org/findfunders/cga.html

Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers:
https://www.givingforum.org/common-grant-applications

Learning to Simplify: http://www.foundant.com/wp/blog/learning-to-simplify/

Due Diligence: http://gmnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Due-Diligence.pdf

Project Streamline: http://www.gmnetwork.org/projectstreamline/about-project-streamline/

Grant Readiness Assessment Tool*:* http://smartegrants.com/2015/06/grant-ready-organization/

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