

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Connecting the nonprofit world with news, jobs, and ideas

Report Cites Grant-Making Officers Who Forge Strong Relationships with Grantees



Chris Kabel, a program officer at the Northwest Health Foundation, holds forums to “demystify” the grant-seeking process.

By Ian Wilhelm
May 2, 2010

Foundations publicly portray their work with grant recipients as one of mutual respect and partnership. But behind the scenes, the relationships are often less wine and roses and more *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Even common courtesies like returning phone calls go ignored, and grant seekers are sometimes left feeling like beggars expected to be grateful for even crumbs of attention.

“You can’t get any information, you can’t have any dialogue, you have no idea what’s going on,” says Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. “Some foundation program officers go weeks and weeks and never return calls or e-mails.”

To help foster positive relations, a new report from the Center for Effective Philanthropy spells out what grantees value in the foundations they work with and puts a spotlight on five grant makers who exemplify those traits.

The foundation staff members were chosen because they earn high marks from grant recipients in anonymous surveys conducted by the Cambridge, Mass., research organization. The center has feedback on 266 grant-making officers at 32 foundations across the country. The five in the report were picked at random from the 20 percent of the “highest performing” employees.

Those selected are: Nicole Gray of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, in Menlo Park, Calif.; Chris Kabel of the Northwest Health Foundation, in Portland, Ore.; Justin Laing of the Heinz Endowments, in Pittsburgh; Wendy Liscow of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, in Morristown, N.J.; and Tara Seeley of the Central Indiana Community Foundation, in Indianapolis.

They represent foundations of various sizes, ranging from \$6.2-billion (Hewlett) to \$80-million (Northwest Health Foundation) in assets, and work on a variety of charitable causes, including the arts, housing, public health, and more.

"So much of the work is about relationships. You can have lots of abstract ideals or intellectual understandings of how you think change happens in the world, or what levers to pull, and this theory of change, and all of that. And that's all important, but you have to be able to act on your ideas." -- Nicole Gray, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, (Menlo Park, Calif.)

As a former charity official, "I know what it's like to raise money from a foundation, what it's like to wait, what it's like to get rejected. I do try to be the program officer I would've wanted to have." -- Justin Laing, Heinz Endowments (Pittsburgh)

"It's the open-ended questions and the willingness to listen in a nonjudgmental way that allows an organization's leadership to give you the bad news and the good news." -- Tara Seeley, Central Indiana Community Foundation (Indianapolis)

What they have in common is an aptitude for developing strong relationships with the groups to which they provide philanthropic money.

"We hope their experiences will inspire foundation leaders and program officers to get clearer on what they need to do to achieve this kind of performance," says the report.

In addition to the profiles, the report looks at four characteristics that are key to positive relations between foundations and grant recipients. Based on the center's surveys of more than 25,700 grant recipients, they are:

Understanding. Charities value grant-making officials who have a strong grasp of their strategies and goals.

Selection process. Charitable groups appreciate a grant-selection process that is timely and candid and helps them improve their proposal writing and operations.

Expertise. Foundation officers who have a thorough understanding of the charitable causes they support or the geographic region where they work earn high marks.

Communications. Groups receiving foundation support say they prefer grant makers who communicate with them frequently.

The report's recommendations may seem like common sense.

Yet the center's surveys—which provide grant recipients with an anonymous way to air their frustrations—often show that some foundations overlook them.

“I am hesitant to say this, but I have seen some staff be really condescending to people that they didn't think mattered,” one grant recipient was quoted as saying in the report. “When that happens, people in the community talk, and it gives the foundation a bad reputation.”

For insight to how grant makers can earn a positive reputation, the following is a look at how a few of the foundation officers praised in the center's report approach their work.

Justin Laing, of the Heinz Endowments, says details matter in his line of work. For example, the 39-year-old started wearing a tie after he joined the foundation four years ago. But he abandoned the practice because he felt it was projecting an image of “Mr. Big Shot” to the grass-roots arts leaders with whom he met.

“The tie represented that there was a real difference between me and the person on the other side of the table,” he says. “Hopefully they're more comfortable because I'm more comfortable, and therefore we can have a more authentic conversation.”

Mr. Laing helps to manage a \$9-million arts-and-culture program, overseeing about 60 grant recipients. The endowments have \$1.2-billion in assets and employ 33 people in all. In describing his approach, Mr. Laing says he tries to keep connected to in-the-trenches charity work. For example, he serves on the board of a local social-service organization. “I try to stay active in the fields of community change and community improvement.”

His advice for new grant makers: “Trust the perspective that got you there. There was something that attracted the foundation to you to begin with. But also respect that this is a different field. Not all the skills you bring will translate.”

Chris Kabel, of the Northwest Health Foundation, says that over his five years with the foundation, he has “absorbed” the organization's zeal for developing close relationships with charities.

“We all share a very strong commitment to being true partners with community groups and, whenever we can, negating or at least mitigating that power dynamic that exists between grantor and grantee,” he says about Northwest Health's 14 staff members.

In his work awarding grants to fight obesity and improve public health in Oregon and southwest Washington, Mr. Kabel, 42, oversees 62 grant recipients, on average. The foundation overall has \$80-million in assets and awards about \$6-million a year in grants.

Mr. Kabel meets regularly with grant recipients at their offices and holds occasional public forums to discuss foundation projects. While he says such meetings can be difficult given the workload and travel time, they help to “demystify” how grants are made.

When he was a fund raiser at the Oregon Health & Science University Foundation, he says, “some foundations just seemed to be impenetrable.”

He adds: “You’d tiptoe up to the door, slip a proposal under it, and tiptoe away. There were very few learning opportunities about what was liked or disliked about the proposal.”

Some of the skills needed to be an effective program officer, Mr. Kabel says, take time to cultivate.

“Grant making has been called both an art and science,” he says. “For a lot of new program officers—and I fell into this camp as well—when you first walk in the door, you are more focused on the science. How do the processes work? As you get more comfortable with the science end, you branch out into the more subtle aspects of grant making, which is much more relationship-based.”

Mr. Kabel credits his employer with understanding what it takes to build strong grantee relationships.

“Most other foundations our size have fewer staff. There’s a tradeoff there,” he says. “You can typically award more dollars out to community-based organizations. But you can create a dynamic where you’re constantly on this treadmill.”

The full report can be found at:

http://www.effectivephilanthropy.org/assets/pdfs/CEP_Working_with_Graantees.pdf