



Sharpen Your Focus

5 Questions That Will Improve Your Grantmaking

Giving money away is a complicated business, but I have found a few simple questions that can bring a lot of clarity to the process. The questions are straightforward, but they lead to deep issues that can have a profound impact on the way you direct your grantmaking. As you consider your next initiative, take some time to ask these questions:

1. What's the problem?

The first question to ask is what problem you want to solve. You may already know that homelessness is the issue you care most about. But what's the underlying cause that you want to address? Is the problem that there aren't enough jobs available? Is the problem the insufficient help available for people who are suffering from foreclosure? Or is it the people coming out of the prison system with no resources and nowhere to live? These are all important issues, and there are probably dozens more problems related to homelessness that you could consider. The question is how you will deploy your grant funds in ways that have the most impact on the problem that you care about. Answering this question will help define the scope of what you want to do.

2. Is there data?

The second consideration is the data you have and the data you need. Don't base your grantmaking on assumptions. Make sure that you truly understand the problem -- based on data. A lot of it could be out there already. Identify sources of existing information, such as universities (local or national); nonprofit research centers; or the data archives of your city, county, or state. If the information doesn't exist, then the first grant you should make is one that will allow you to gather it. Determine who is best positioned to collect the data you're looking for, and fund them to do it.

3. Who else is working on this?

The third consideration is finding out who else is at work on the same problem. You want to identify the people who can help inform your grantmaking and the organizations you can potentially partner with. They could include national experts, local experts, other funders or donors, nonprofit organizations, and researchers. Pick up the phone and call them. There might be ways that you can work together to leverage your impact.

4. What resources are available?

Aside from money, you want to ask yourself what resources you have (or what resources you can create) that can help address the problem. Essentially, you need to think outside your checkbook. These resources could be your contacts, knowledge, expertise, relationships, or even meeting space. They can also be existing resources within your organization, such as staff with marketing expertise.

If, for instance, you want to address economic development and job opportunities in your community, you might convene interested parties from your local community college, your city and county economic development department, and local nonprofit employment providers to develop ways everyone can work together on a common agenda. So yes, your grant funding will help, but the power of people and organizations working together may be the real game changer.



Putnam Consulting Group

Confident Giving • Dramatic Return

Sharpen Your Focus, continued

5. How will you learn?

The fifth consideration is deciding how you will learn and make improvements along the way. Make sure that you put processes in place to make course corrections as needed. A formal evaluation method is one such process, but you can also periodically convene your colleagues, grantees, and stakeholders to check in on progress, identify challenges and opportunities, and determine whether any changes should be made.

Sometimes we can get lost in our plans and goals. I find it helpful to take a step back and seek clarity by asking these five simple questions: What's the specific problem you want to solve? What data do you have and what data do you need? Who else is working on this problem? What resources besides money can help address this problem? How will you learn? If you take time to consider these questions, I guarantee you'll be more successful with your funding, more satisfied with your work, and more innovative in your solutions.

© Kris Putnam-Walkerly 2013. All rights reserved. Kris Putnam-Walkerly, MSW, is president of Putnam Consulting Group, Inc., a national philanthropy consulting firm helping foundations increase impact through smarter grantmaking. She is also the author of the *Philanthropy411* blog. She can be reached at 800-598-2102 or kris@putnam-consulting.com. Her website is <http://putnamconsultinggroup.com>.