

# Foundation Leaders Want Real Partnerships with Grantees

When foundation folks talk about what they want in a relationship with their nonprofit grantees, they sound remarkably like someone discussing an important friendship. They value candor, frequent communication, willingness to discuss problems and setbacks, and responsiveness to their needs. In essence, they want a real partnership.

We asked leaders from a variety of North Carolina foundations: "What's the best — and worst — thing a grantee has done to create an effective relationship?"

Their answers follow several themes:

**1** Let us hear from you beyond official grant communications.

We want to get to know you over time.

▼ David Setzer, Executive Director, The Blanche & Julian Robertson Family Foundation: "We want our grantees to keep us informed of activities and actions through emails and

especially through personal visits to the Foundation office, reporting on events, programs, and personalities. This happens with grantees as various 'paths are crossed' in the normal course of human interaction and on a deliberate basis, which is much appreciated."

▼ Kathy Higgins, President, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation: "Some of our most valuable experiences involve the grantee understanding that our relationship is a partnership, and that the foundation of a successful partnership is communication. While we're

interested in learning about results and successes, just as important is when a grantee is forthcoming in sharing what might not be working and lessons learned. We view ourselves as more than just funders. We are investors. And as investors, we want to assist our grantees in succeeding, which includes helping them make adjustments as their programs evolve. This requires honest, sincere, and continual communication."

▼ Doug Zinn, Executive Director, The Mary Duke Biddle Foundation: "The best grantees communicate without prompting, and the worst don't

communicate — even with prompting."

▼ Betty Gray Davis, Senior Program Officer, The Winston-Salem Foundation: "The best grantees have stayed in touch before, during, and after the grant period to keep the Foundation informed about issues and about grant activities."

▼ Beverley Francis, Director of Philanthropic Services, Triangle Community Foundation: "The best thing a grantee has done to create an effective relationship is to schedule time to meet with Foundation staff to share information about their organization *before* requesting funds. They research our website and have an interest in

the work of the Foundation beyond a grant. They typically email or send a thank-you card to the Foundation staff that met with them and send us updated information about activities. Sometimes the grantee will invite our staff to events or programs."

**2** Be upfront when you face problems.

▼ Walker Sanders, President, The Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro: "The best thing from my experience has been open and honest dialogue in a timely manner. It's much better for the grantee to communicate

openly, especially if the funded program is not proceeding as planned or the anticipated outcomes are not being realized. I can think of several instances where a grantee has come forward with some information on the funded program that was not expected. When that happens, we rework the grant so the funds can be used in the most efficient manner."

▼ Gene Cochrane, President, The Duke Endowment: "One of the best ways to create an effective relationship is to select the right person to oversee the project. It's imperative to have a lead person who not only has the expertise to do a good job, but who can communicate openly and honestly throughout the grant process. This is especially important if a program isn't achieving anticipated results. A candid discussion early on could help realign goals and get the program back on track."

**3** Don't burn your bridges with us.

▼ Beverley: "The worst is when people don't prepare for a Foundation site visit or arrive late, don't send a note to thank the Foundation or donor for the grant, don't follow up with us to find out why they didn't receive a grant, don't communicate during the grant period (including about problems that arise), don't submit reports on time, or provide inaccurate information about their organization's budget or programs."

▼ Barbara Bingham, Executive Director, Outer Banks Community Foundation: "This has happened very seldom, but the worst thing is when a grantee spends some of the grant funds for something not directly related to the grant award. If the grantee contacts our office and asks about a related expenditure that may have surfaced during the process, we almost always approve the request, but we want to know before funds are spent."

▼ David: "The worst is the failure of follow-through on plans and promises which had been outlined in detail in the application because of negligence and weakness of leadership not apparent at the time the grant was reviewed and approved. Leadership and administrative weaknesses are the great unknown in foundation work."

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Beverley Francis of the Triangle Community Foundation exchanges cards with a potential future grantee.

Karen Zinn

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Some grants are made on faith and with great hope that something good will come of them."

**4** We appreciate honest, focused information.

- ▼ Mary Holmes, Executive Director, Cumberland Community Foundation: "Tell the truth. So many nonprofits try to sell a grand story. That is not necessary. We acknowledge that they are doing the really hard work in the trenches and we want to help them. I really appreciate a frank conversation, warts and all. 'Here are our challenges... Here are our strengths... Here is what we really need...' This puts us in the grantee's court in a partnership. For example, I know with certainty that whatever Rusty Long (Executive Director of Fayetteville Urban Ministry) tells me is true. That empowers me to recommend FUM to our Donor Advised Funds."
- ▼ Gene: "The worst thing a grantee can do is to submit confusing, wordy grant requests and reports. The message can be lost in 'fluffy' narrative that doesn't clearly state program goals and objectives. Be clear, factual, and supportable about why you are seeking a grant, what you plan to do with the money, what will be accomplished, and how you plan to measure results."

**5** Tell us what happened with the funds.

- ▼ Bryant Kinney, Vice President, Government and Regulatory Affairs, Duke Energy Carolinas (The Duke Energy Foundation): "We've had grantees that cannot tell us what funds were used for in previous years. Sometimes these are small grants, but when asking for new funding it's important to be able to indicate previous use and success."
- ▼ Walker: "The worst I've seen is totally covering up a grant for what it really was — operational support. Inventing 'new' programs to cover up operational support is only going to create a future problem with the foundation, and most likely no continued funding. Many foundations now fund grants for operational support."
- ▼ Betty Gray: "The worst thing is when a grantee spends the grant funds for the wrong purpose."

**6** Understand our priorities and responsibilities.

- ▼ Barbara: "I really appreciate any grant applicant who provides the materials exactly the way we want them. This makes processing easier, and it also shows that the applicant has followed directions and as a

grantee can be expected to provide appropriate documentation."

- ▼ Kathy: "The most frustrating experiences are when a grantee ignores aspects of the grant agreement. This could be as simple as misrepresenting our name in a press release or as complex as changing the scope of the funded project in the absence of consulting their Foundation program manager. Through our grant-making relationships, we are entrusting our grantees with not only funding, but also our support and reputation as a foundation. In return, we ask that they adhere to a set of simple guidelines, and the inability to do so ultimately reflects poorly on each of us."
- ▼ Mary: "The worst thing is when grantees don't hold up their end of the agreement on reporting requirements. I really resent it when our *very* limited staff resources are spent tracking down reports that should come automatically and on schedule. If we have to work that hard to get a good report, then what else is wrong in that organization? It's a tell-tale sign."

It really is about open, respectful partnerships and learning together along the way. ■

— Jenny Spiker

Jenny Spiker is Common Ground editor.