



## What Do Funders Look for in a Grant Proposal?

Ah — the quintessential question! Wouldn't it be great to get inside the head of your intended funders to find out what really knocks their socks off? Or how about being a fly on the wall at a meeting where they make their funding decisions?

Unfortunately, I can't read the tea leaves for you. But I can tell you two very important things to keep in mind.

### **Each Funder Is Unique and Should Be Treated as Such**

If you've read the first blog post in this series, you already know that each funder has a particular set of funding criteria and specific goals that they are trying to achieve with their philanthropy. They also have certain values or ideas that guide them in making their funding choices. Your grant proposal should demonstrate that your organization and the funder are both on the same page.

As you research potential grantmakers, be sure to read (and reread) their published funding guidelines, priorities, and requests for proposals (RFPs). Find out who they have funded before and if and how your organization could fit strategically into their funding portfolio.

For best results, I recommend also interacting with the funder before you submit your grant proposal. A dialogue of any sort will help you "read between the lines" of the funder information you find online.

### **Familiarize Yourself with a General "Bottom Line"**

Before you start your research process, you should know what virtually all funders are looking for. Try putting yourself in their shoes for a moment. Funders are seeking a strong return on their investment in terms of the social impact their dollars will help facilitate. Your grant proposal should convince them that your work is worth investing in — because it is both inspiring and structurally sound. Here is a handy checklist of what that looks like.

### **Organizations**

Funders are most interested in an organization that has the following characteristics.

- ***Is well positioned to address the community need, either alone or with others in the field***

Grantmakers are looking for assurance that they can trust your organization to competently help solve the community problem you are addressing. You need to show that you can lead this work because you have strong internal capacity or can play a unique role in collaboration with others in your field. They also need to know that you are a reliable and respected presence in your field.

- ***Has sustainable community support***

Funders want to support organizations that have a variety of strong investors. They want to see that you have other grantmakers on board, as well as individual donors, volunteers, or contributions of goods or services. They are looking for financial sustainability.

- ***Is a learning and growing organization***

You may think that you need to have all the answers for how to turn grant money into nothing but *stellar* results. (Actually, maybe you do hold the magic bullet the funder has been looking for. If so, by all means go for it!)

But you don't actually have to be 100 percent successful 100 percent of the time to be of great value to grantmakers. While they want to see their grantees succeed, they also know that sometimes what we learn from "mistakes" can be even more valuable. Grantmakers rely on

nonprofits to show them what works and what doesn't work. They especially like to fund organizations that are actively addressing their weaknesses and finding new and better pathways to success.

- ***Uses transparent and accountable internal processes and procedures***

This is true about your entire organization, including finances, administration, human resources, and other "back office" work. Your internal operations are very important to funders and should not be overlooked. Your integrity is on the line here!

## **Programs and Projects**

Funders are most interested in a program or project that has the following characteristics.

- ***Focuses on a pressing community need of concern to the funder***

First, the affected community has to express its need in clear terms. That need will be related to its specific realities and issues. If you can show that the need simply can't wait to be addressed, and the funder agrees, you're on to something.

- ***Aligns with your mission and is a high priority for you***

You should only propose work that is centered on your strengths or core competencies. That is, stay aligned with your mission and make sure that you only pursue grants to support priority programs, projects, or operations at your organization.

- ***Has a specific, realistic plan for implementing a new or proven solution***

Funders need to know that your proposed work has a good chance of successfully delivering results — within the grant period (usually one year). So they need to see a solid work plan with a well-aligned budget that leads to accomplishing your goals in a timely manner. While your work doesn't necessarily have to break new ground, you do need to show that it will build on past success or serve an otherwise unserved or underserved community. If you can feature some unique aspects, all the better!

- ***Is likely to have a clear, measurable impact***

The funder has to be convinced that your plan shows promise in effectively addressing the community need in the short term and is also part of a long-term strategy. Your method of regularly evaluating your success should use both numbers and narrative, aiming to show an appropriate level of impact. Of course, once you get the feedback you need, funders want to know that you will use that information to continuously improve.

- ***Involves the beneficiaries in planning or implementation***

Funders know that the people who could benefit the most from your program are the experts on their own community issues. Community members also know what works and doesn't work for them. The most successful programs were not designed by an outsider but grew organically out of the communities they are supposedly helping.

- ***Is planned to be replicable or will produce data to share with others***

As you know, nonprofit resources are always scarce. Funders want to support successful programs that can fairly easily and inexpensively be adapted and replicated in other communities. Sharing successful models leverages their grant dollars and helps spread good ideas: two things funders love.

So I recommend trying on your intended funder's hat whenever you are writing a grant proposal. You may even want to do a mock review of your grant proposal draft to help you see it from the funder's point of view. Once you know what funders are looking for, you are geared up to travel along the road to grant writing success!