

Smarter Grantmaking for Grantee Organizations

— Conversations to Have with Funders



For more information contact:

Transparency and Accountability Initiative
OpenGov Hub, 1110 Vermont Ave NW #500
Washington, DC 20005

www.transparency-initiative.org

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CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR GRANTSEEKERS AND GRANTMAKERS

Funder grantmaking and learning practices are best when informed by grantee organization needs and experience, yet there are many factors that limit or even block this feedback loop. What kind of partnerships and meaningful change might be possible if both groups shared a mutual responsibility to convert traditional conversation non-starters into a two-way dialogue?

As funders, TAI members recognize our responsibility to listen and respond to grantee questions and concerns, even when we are unable to provide the desired responses. We also invite grantseekers to draw inspiration from these illustrative questions to seek clarity and advocate for your needs with current and prospective funders.

Shared Interests

- How might we leverage your experience on [topic] at an upcoming event we are holding with our partners?
- Have you encountered the work of [peer organization] in the context of your new strategic focus on [topic]?
- As we design our new strategy on [topic], would you offer any advice or suggest any experts we should consult?

Values-Aligned Relationships

- How might we integrate our organization's [values or practices] into this grant process?
- What type and frequency of communication about grant progress do you expect from grantees? How do you inform grantees about the foundation's strategic progress?
- Are you open to participating in our [organizational learning practice] on a semi-annual basis?

Grantee Strategy, Resourcing, and Implementation

- How might we integrate our non-English language annual report into our grant application? Are you able to cover costs for document translation to English?
- Is our website content on Board composition and meeting minutes useful for your due diligence process?
- Can we discuss what success looks like during this grant period and our longer-term vision for this new initiative?

Narrative Reporting

- Can we align (or stagger) this grant reporting schedule with our existing reporting and learning products and events?
- Can we use our annual report to fulfill the reporting requirements for this grant? If not, could we supplement our annual report with a conversation?
- Given our respective audiences, what reporting format(s) might best serve our mutual learning needs?

Leverage Learning

- Do you have a learning agenda (if not already public), and how might we engage with the emerging evidence you are generating or using?
- Might you introduce us to another organization that has met a similar (organizational or programmatic) challenge we are currently facing?

See also Shared Interests.

Open Communication

- Can we schedule time to discuss an upcoming (staffing, programmatic, or other) change?
- What advice or other support can you offer as we plan for a leadership transition in the coming year?

Organizational Support

- Are we eligible for any technical or other support from your foundation or others to help us pursue our plans to diversify our staff?
- Do you offer any peer solidarity or other networking opportunities for organizations working on [similar issues, in similar geographic areas, etc.]?

See also Open Conversation and Leverage Learning.

Seek opportunities to extend the conversation beyond the four corners of strategy documents.

— **Funders hold many responsibilities**, including to allocate resources in pursuit of their strategies and to design and adapt grantmaking practices that enable and support the work of grantee organizations. Funder grantmaking and learning practices are best when informed by grantee organization needs and experience. Yet there are myriad factors that limit or even prevent the flow of feedback between grantmakers and seekers. What kind of partnerships and learning might be possible if both groups shared a mutual responsibility to convert these conversation nonstarters into a two-way dialogue?

As a funder collaborative, [Transparency and Accountability Initiative \(TAI\)](#) is focused on global transparency, accountability, and participation (TAP) initiatives. One of our shared strategic priorities is to adopt smarter grantmaking practices in service of both our own and grantee organization learning. Collectively, TAI funder members invite current and prospective grantee organizations to work with us to start and sustain conversations that will nurture this funder-grantee feedback loop. Below, we offer a series of tips for conversations that grantseekers can initiate with current and prospective funders to strengthen our mutual practices.

This note is not exhaustive and certainly not meant to be prescriptive. Our grantmaking spans all global regions and supports organizations of all sizes working towards TAP outcomes in a variety of programmatic and organizational contexts. As funders, we recognize our responsibility to listen and respond to grantee questions and concerns, even when we are unable to provide the desired responses. While the actions below may not be feasible for all grantmakers and grantseekers, these conversations are certainly worth having when grantees are facing challenges or simply have questions. We hope these conversations will help you and your program officer generate new ways to better connect grantmaking and learning practices.

— **1. Start the conversation around shared interests**

TAI values transparency, and we all work to align our practices with this value, including publishing information on our strategies or approaches. You can read more online about the TAP work of the [UK Department for International Development](#), [Ford](#), [Luminate](#), [MacArthur](#), and the [Fiscal Governance Program](#) at Open Society Foundations. (Stay tuned for OSF's new Economic Justice Program strategic direction in the coming year.) You can find [Hewlett's](#) strategy documents in English, Spanish, or French. **Use these strategies as only one data point** and seek opportunities to extend the conversation beyond the four corners of those strategy documents.

Grantmakers spend a fair bit of time engaging with the TAP field and related sectors of interest – through conferences, site visits, Twitter conversations, and more, just like you! **Engage in these spaces with shared curiosity.** Recognize our mutual

intentions to address the problems that prevent more inclusive citizen participation and more accountable governance.

Though funder-fundraiser power dynamics can affect these conversations, they don't have to prevent them from ever happening. Hear what this Hewlett Program Officer Alfonsina Peñaloza wants more and less of on [What Donors Want](#), a podcast focused on, among other things, reminding us that grantmakers are also human beings.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How might we leverage your experience on [topic] at an upcoming event we are holding with our partners?
- Have you encountered the work of [peer organization] in the context of your new strategic focus on [topic]?
- As we design our new strategy on [topic], would you offer any advice or suggest any experts we should consult?

2. Set the tone for values-aligned relationships

Transparency and accountability practitioners and activists have long focused on equitable systems change, whether around access to government services or more just tax governance. These TAP outcomes are closely related to organizational values and practices – not least among them transparency – that form the foundation of a grantee-funder relationship.

Consider generating a list of questions important to your organization about values, culture, and policy and sharing that with current and prospective funders. This could also include more practical topics around expectations for reporting and communication, primary points of contact, or networking and other opportunities for support. Funders will ask you similar questions, so this is an opportunity for that to be a two-way conversation.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How might we integrate our organization's [values or practices] into this grant process?
- What type and frequency of communication about grant progress do you expect from grantees? How do you inform grantees about the foundation's strategic progress?
- Are you open to participating in our [organizational learning practice] on a semi-annual basis?

Rather than assume that proposals require entirely new content, have a conversation with a potential funder around ways to leverage existing knowledge.

3. Work with your program officer to strengthen the linkages between your strategy, resourcing, and implementation

Access to resources is a key component of civil society's right to freedom of association and of overall organizational health and effectiveness. But the continuous churn of proposal writing often places larger, English-language dominant organizations at an advantage over other groups. While funders are responsible for taking steps towards more accessible and inclusive grantmaking processes, grantee organizations might also seek ways to advocate for their own needs or ask about unclear or otherwise confusing funder practices.

Rather than assume that proposals require entirely new content, **have a conversation with a potential funder around ways to leverage existing knowledge**, including whether translation support is available for non-English language documents. For example, ask whether the funder will consider accepting an already-crafted proposal if pursuing project funding or your most recent strategy if pursuing core support. Consider what content might already be available on your website (i.e., staff and board composition, vision and mission statements, past annual reports, board meeting minutes). And don't forget to **discuss planning for and resourcing** a "Zero Year," the often overlooked inception phase critical to get new work started.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How might we integrate our non-English language annual report into our grant application? Are you able to cover costs for document translation to English?
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4. Save (virtual) trees: do your part to eliminate unnecessary and unused narrative reporting

Drawing from TAP field experience on using data for more accountable governance, it's not just about the availability of data, and the same can be said of reporting. Beyond supply, how can we focus on reports that are useful and used? There may

be funder-specific legal or other requirements that shape reporting requirements, but oftentimes there is room for negotiation.

Ask to align reporting timelines for a new grant with your organization's existing reporting and learning cycles. Consider your organization's recurring events (e.g., board meetings) or other planned initiatives (e.g., flagship reports or events). What would an ideal reporting cycle look like for your organization? It is important to raise this issue before finalizing your grant agreement, as this is often where such terms are established. Even better, **raise the possibility of using a single annual report** for some or all your funders, where appropriate.

Explore the possibility of combining different reporting formats or moving towards alternate formats altogether, depending on the grant type. For core support, perhaps an existing report or other knowledge product would meet your and the PO's information and learning needs. For project support, a grant product, presentation, or a short video might be appropriate. Do consider the resources needed for different formats – more useful reporting is not always faster or easier to produce.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Can we align (or stagger) this grant reporting schedule with our existing reporting and learning products and events?
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- Given our respective audiences, what reporting format(s) might best serve our mutual learning needs?

5. Leverage learning as a common motivation and practice for grantseekers and grantmakers

Let's be honest, grant reporting is not always the best mechanism for certain learning questions. And as grantmakers, we recognize that grant reporting should not be the only forum for learning.

Program officers are deeply motivated to learn with and from you. Your program officer has deep substantive and often technical expertise on the issues your organization works on. They are definitely sensitive to the complexities of trying to curb corruption or contribute to more inclusive public participation. And they are constantly learning from the work of other organizations within their grant portfolios and broader networks.

Treat your program officer as a thought partner. Share brief updates on emerging lessons learned or thorny questions with which you may be wrestling. Chances are they share these questions and may have useful connections to peer organizations or evidence that could support these learning efforts.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Do you have a learning agenda (if not already public), and how might we engage with the emerging evidence you are generating or using?
- Might you introduce us to another organization that has met a similar (organizational or programmatic) challenge we are currently facing?

See also Shared Interests.

Treat your program officer as an ally who may have support to offer as your organization navigates expected or unexpected changes or challenges.

6. Keep communication open and ongoing, especially during difficult times

Mutual learning and open communication with your funder sound great, until you hit a serious bump in the road. A key government ally to your data disclosure initiative was ousted from their position. An external evaluation surfaces gaps in your theory of change or action towards more responsive government behavior. You are promoting your program officer / M&E data whiz / other-amazing-staff-person, and you're not sure how you will fill their previous functions.

Call it what you will, setbacks, failures, reflections, or even successes, each of these scenarios are significant and often vulnerable moments for a program, an organization, and grantee-funder relationships.

Find an appropriate way to communicate “big news” with your program officer, good or bad, or other major changes that affect your organization's health or effectiveness. And don't delay! Your program officer is invested in your organization's health and success, literally. So, treat your program officer as an ally who may have support to offer as your organization navigates expected or unexpected changes or challenges.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Can we schedule time to discuss an upcoming (staffing, programmatic, or other) change?
- What advice or other support can you offer as we plan for a leadership transition in the coming year?

7. Program officers are responsible to give out money, and more, so help them do this

Many funders offer project or core support and have other mechanisms to provide supplemental support – to existing grantee organizations. This can include funding or technical assistance for general organizational health and effectiveness needs, including diversity, equity, and inclusion practices; monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems; or other practices that would help you to pursue your organizational goals. Examples include Ford’s [Building Institutions and Networks](#) initiative, Hewlett’s [Organizational Effectiveness](#) program, portfolio support at Luminate, and the Organizational Health Fund through OSF’s new Economic Justice Program.

Don’t assume that your organization is not eligible for different types of grants or other support from the same funder. Not sure if your funder has such grant-making tools available? Just ask! And if not possible with your current funder, your program officer may be able to connect your organization with other sources of support for these issues.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Are we eligible for any technical or other support from your foundation or others to help us pursue our plans to diversify our staff?
- Do you offer any peer solidarity or other networking opportunities for organizations working on [similar issues, in similar geographic areas, etc.]?

See also Open Communication and Leverage Learning.

Transparency and Accountability Initiative is a collaborative of leading funders of transparency, accountability and participation worldwide. It envisions a world where citizens are informed and empowered; governments are open and responsive; and collective action advances the public good. Toward this end, TAI aims to increase the collective impact of transparency and accountability interventions by strengthening grantmaking practice, learning and collaboration among its members. TAI focuses on the following thematic areas: data use for accountability, strengthening civic space, taxation and tax governance, learning for improved grantmaking.



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ACCOUNTABILITY
INITIATIVE

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@TAInitiative