

Experienced Grantmakers at Work

When Creativity Comes Into Play

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Executive Summary

This paper explores how experienced grantmakers develop their craft—how they learn, deepen their skills, and become effective and creative grantmakers. The basic skills of grantmaking—how to review proposals, analyze the effectiveness of organizations, read financial statements, and structure evaluations—are reasonably well documented and taught in a variety of venues and formats. Far less is known about how the basic skills of grantmaking coalesce into a craft, how grantmakers develop the capacity to do high-quality, effective grantmaking and to make a contribution to their substantive fields and to the field of philanthropy.

This exploration of the skills and abilities of experienced grantmakers is based on interviews with ten recipients of the Council on Foundations' Scrivner Award, given each year to honor the work of a grantmaker selected as an exemplar of creativity in philanthropy. The prize honors the work of Robert W. Scrivner, who was a grantmaker at the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Rockefeller Family Fund. He led those foundations into many areas of activity new to philanthropy and critical to the times in which he lived, such as nuclear disarmament and the role of Agent Orange in Vietnam veterans' health.

Central to the argument of the paper, based on current thinking in creativity research, is that creativity and effectiveness are highly linked. Creativity is not just novelty, an unexpected or idiosyncratic approach, but an approach that while initially considered novel ultimately becomes accepted. From this perspective, impact is incorporated into the definition of creative grantmaking. The sample of Scrivner awardees is assumed to exemplify and highlight skills, abilities, and qualities that many other experienced, effective grantmakers use in their grantmaking.

Questions addressed in this study of creative grantmakers and their work include:

- How do creative grantmakers work?
- What are the skills that go into creative, effective grantmaking?
- What are facilitators of and barriers to creative grantmaking?
- What are the qualities of foundations that foster creative grantmaking?

From the interviews, five common themes most central to creative grantmaking were identified in the stories of the Scrivner awardees, which are called here “the foundations of creativity.” Much of this paper explicates these foundations of creativity using the stories and voices of the Scrivner awardees.

The first theme or foundation, *a motivating belief*, surfaced as each of the grantmakers talked about their work. This quality was referred to by some as core values and principles, by others as a spiritual dimension in their work, and yet by others as simply something they believed in just because it was right. Although some of the Scrivner awardees would reject the phrase because of its righteous overtones, there was often a moral dimension to the motivating belief. For each, a motivating belief provided a very basic template against which they judged themselves and their work and, often, the energy and motivation that kept them at it.

In addition to a motivating belief, the grantmakers described a range of *cognitive skills* and abilities they used in their work that enabled them to devise strategies of using grant dollars and the other tools that grantmakers have at their disposal to accomplish effective and creative grantmaking. These skills include: sifting information, translating between contexts, staying grounded, seeing patterns, synthesizing, and being flexible. While cognitive in nature, they also tie back to motivating beliefs.

The ten interviewees stressed how essential their relationships to grantees, grantseekers, and people working directly in the fields they wish to affect are to their own creativity. Several identified these relationships as the source of their own ability to be creative. Yet, there were substantial barriers to authenticity in the grantmaker-grantee relationship. To accept yet not be unnecessarily distanced by the power inequity necessitates important interpersonal skills and strategies described as the third foundation of creativity, *interpersonal competence*.

A special case of interpersonal competence has to do with working with diverse individuals and groups. To accomplish their work, the Scrivner awardees often crossed all kinds of social and cultural boundaries, working individually and in groups with people and organizations occupying very different roles and places in the social order. It takes special skills and abilities to cross these social boundaries, and the fourth foundation of creativity, *crossing boundaries and mixing worlds*, speaks to this set of interpersonal skills.

Finally, the Scrivner awardees describe the process of developing and implementing creative and effective programs as one that takes time, responding flexibly to what they learn, and changing course when necessary. As they describe their grantmaking paths, it is clear that staying the course draws upon some new qualities and intensifies the need for the skills of the other four common qualities. These are identified and discussed in the fifth foundation of creativity, *a sense of journey*.

Most of the Scrivner award winners interviewed had at least partially developed these foundations of creativity prior to entering philanthropy,

but were enabled by their institutions to develop them further and to use them to become exceptional grantmakers. Trust and flexibility were critical to their ability to experiment, pursue unconventional ideas, and change course based on learning.

While the creative grantmakers studied were able to make a difference in their program or issue areas, their skills and abilities do not seem to have had a broader impact on the field of philanthropy. The paper concludes with discussion of how the kind of creative or effective grantmaking described among the Scrivner award winners could be developed more widely. Changes in philanthropic practice suggested in this concluding section include:

- Providing more ways of sharing experiences that get to the heart of the grantmaking enterprise;
- Offering professional development opportunities to grantmakers that are consistent with intentional, long-term career choices;
- Understanding more about the occupational hazards of philanthropy and, in particular, developing effective methods of countering isolation and inundation;
- Paying more attention to the personal qualities and institutional conditions that foster high-quality, effective grantmaking; and
- Using methods of hiring and supervising grantmakers that recognize some of the subtle yet important qualities of individuals and foundations that foster high-quality grantmaking.