

Experienced Grantmakers at Work

When Creativity Comes Into Play

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Discussion Guide

This discussion guide is designed to help you think through the concepts presented in Ruth Brousseau’s paper, *Grantmakers at Work: When Creativity Comes Into Play*, and consider how they may be useful to you in improving your everyday work in philanthropy. The guide is divided into sections representing the “foundations of creativity” identified in the paper. It includes questions and activities designed to help you reflect upon your experience as a grantmaker and how you approach your work, and suggests steps you can take to enhance your skills and enjoyment of the work.

Using the Guide

The ideal method for using the guide is to gather a small group of friends and colleagues who are also grantmakers and will commit to coming together five times. Each meeting would focus on one of the foundations of creativity described in the paper, which each person would read and think about prior to the meeting.

If convening a group is not feasible, a second method is to create a journal focused on your grantmaking experiences. A grantmaking-focused journal does not need to be one you would write in daily, or even weekly, but it can be an intermittent record of your thoughts, reflections, and feelings. It can offer an important means to stay in touch with yourself in your work, and guide your development in grantmaking. Questions included in the sections below can serve as prompts for reflecting upon your work and how you can feel and be more creative in it. You may wish to select the exercises that resonate best with your interests.

A caveat: These exercises are primarily for experienced grantmakers—to help them reflect on the skills and qualities they use in their work, and thereby enhance their creativity and effectiveness. The exercises concentrate on factors that are in the control of grantmakers, not on organizational or institutional issues that may hinder creative and effective grantmaking. However, because these types of barriers are important, each exercise does include one question on the topic.

Starting Out

Using Brousseau’s definition of creativity (which includes effectiveness), assess how creative you feel in your grantmaking work. How would you rate yourself on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is “not creative at all” and 10 “very creative?” Where would you like to be? If there is no gap, develop a list of your five most important keys to creative practice and compare it with Brousseau’s. How do the two lists differ?

Session 1. Values and Beliefs Central to Your Grantmaking

The goal of the first meeting is to identify your core beliefs and values as they relate to your work in grantmaking. One way of getting to these core beliefs and values may be to talk about your own life – your values, beliefs, and things you feel deeply about—and to discuss how they are actualized (or not) in your own grantmaking. Alternatively, it may be helpful to get to these self-reflective questions by talking about others whom you admire. Either option is fine.

Questions about yourself

- Thinking beyond or more deeply than the externalities of pay, convenience, and prestige, what brought you into philanthropy?
- What keeps you working in the field?
- What values or beliefs are central to your life and work?
- Where in your personal history do you identify the source of these values or beliefs?
- What motivates you—beyond the need to get the work done?
- Can you identify an immersion experience, as Brousseau describes, that has been important in developing the values and beliefs important to your work?

Questions about others

- Which social change activist do you most admire?
- What qualities does this person exemplify?
- Do these qualities relate to your work in philanthropy? How?
- Is there a philanthropist you admire?

- Which qualities of this person resonate with you?
- How have they influenced you directly or indirectly?

The fit between you and your work in philanthropy

- Do you express your values and beliefs in your work? How strong a fit is there between your values, beliefs, and your role at work?
- What would strengthen the fit between the qualities and values you hold and your role as a grantmaker?

Action

- Identify at least one step you can take to increase the fit between your values and your work role.
- Identify the barriers toward having there be more consonance between your work and your values and beliefs. Which of these are due to you and which are primarily influenced by your working environment?

Session 2. Cognitive Skills: Getting the Work Done

The goal of this session is to think about what it takes to do grant-making—how to get the job done without letting the “work” get in the way of your enjoyment or your ability to integrate your values and beliefs into your grantmaking role.

To begin, think of a grant or experience in grantmaking that you are proud of.

- What were the qualities that contributed to your positive feelings?
- What made the experience stand out?

Getting the picture

- How do you usually learn about your grantmaking area?
- Do you feel sufficiently knowledgeable about it?
- If you had more time, how would you ideally learn more?

- Where does the time go?
- How adequate is the time you have to do your work? How would you rate yourself on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is “working at a leisurely pace” and 10 “feeling overwhelmed and inundated?”
- Take a closer look at your time allocations. In the table below, estimate the percentage of your time that you are engaged in each activity. Also note the percentage that would be ideal.

	Current Percentage	Ideal Percentage
At your desk	_____ %	_____ %
In the office	_____ %	_____ %
Meeting with grantees	_____ %	_____ %
Spending time with other grantmakers	_____ %	_____ %
Reviewing proposals	_____ %	_____ %
Writing reports for the foundation	_____ %	_____ %
Doing write-ups	_____ %	_____ %
Monitoring grants	_____ %	_____ %

- Where are the gaps? What steps can you take to alter the way you allocate your time to be closer to what you want?

Synthesizing what you are learning

People synthesize what they learn in different ways. Some people get insights in the shower and others are most creative in the cocoon of an airplane. Still others make a conscious practice of meditating or taking other active steps to clear their minds in order to allow for what they know to take shape. Some people learn best by talking out their ideas, while others put pen to paper to push their thinking further.

- How do you learn best?
- When do you have your most insightful or creative times?
- Do you create opportunities for a creative synthesis of what you know?

Action

- Identify a method or approach to learning that you do not ordinarily use and try it.
- Identify a shift in a time allocation that you want to achieve. Keep track of your time in this domain briefly to see if you are able to make the shift.
- Keep a page in your work journal to jot down times when you have been able to make a leap in your thinking or knowledge. What were the circumstances? Is there a pattern that you can identify?
- Identify the barriers toward getting past the “work” and to advancing in your thinking or knowledge related to your grantmaking. Which of these are due to you and which are primarily influenced by your working environment?

Session 3. Interpersonal Competence

The goal of this session is to reflect upon interpersonal issues in grantmaking, barriers to authenticity, and ways of overcoming those barriers.

Relationships with grantseekers and grantees

Grantmakers' association to money creates a power imbalance with grantseekers and grantees. This makes it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to get accurate information that is critical to good relationships and effective grantmaking. Much feedback comes through a powerful distorting lens. The following questions draw on a process developed by GrantCraft, a project of the Ford Foundation. (For more information, see General Resources at the conclusion of the guide.)

- How would you describe your relationships with grantees and grantseekers?
- What are the areas of difficulty?
- Think of a time when you knew that information was incomplete or inaccurate. How did you handle the situation?
- How do you handle difficult conversations with grantees? How do you know if you have been effective?

Because problems negotiating the role of grantmaker are often due to being alone, assemble a group of friends for whom the basic ground rule will be candor. Either create or share one or more scenarios in which it is difficult to negotiate the role of grantmaker. Assign roles to each person. Give feedback about how the roles were played. Brainstorm different ways of handling the scenarios.

Action

- Obtain and use two excellent modules of GrantCraft (www.grantcraft.org), one on *Saying Yes/Saying No to Applicants* and another on power dynamics with grantees (forthcoming).

Session 4. Crossing Boundaries and Mixing Worlds

One of the keys to creativity for many grantmakers is to push past their personal boundaries and safety zones, and to put themselves in positions where they have new experiences, open themselves up to things they don't already know, and gain insight and input from individuals who are not the "usual suspects." They stretch personally and ask those involved with them to do the same. Holding meetings with a broad spectrum of participants also is a way to mix up the dialogue and arrive at new and different approaches.

- Rate yourself on a scale from 1 to 10, with one being "always do the same things" and 10 "constantly seeking new experiences and perspectives." Where would you like to be?
- How much opportunity do you have to visit prospective grantees and grantees?
- How many of these experiences push your own personal boundaries of race, culture, or class?
- Does this add to your effectiveness as a grantmaker?
- Do you consider yourself effective in diverse settings? How do you know?
- How often do you convene meetings of diverse groups as a tool in your grantmaking?
- Identify a time when crossing a boundary or pulling people together from diverse worlds added to your grantmaking ability.

- Are there risks and dangers with these activities? What are they?
- How do you structure meetings to recognize this diversity?

Action

- Put yourself in a new situation where you will be in the minority in a group, setting, or geographical area you don't know well. Watch your reactions.
- Identify the barriers toward being able to push boundaries and mix worlds. Which of these are due to you and which are primarily influenced by your working environment?

Session 5. The Journey

For many creative grantmakers, “staying the course” is critical to success. Being able to stay the course involves skills such as getting feedback about one's grantmaking and integrating it into the grantmaking process through an iterative learning process; staying close to the people and programs that are at the heart of one's grantmaking work; overcoming the isolation that is one of grantmakers' major occupational hazards; and staying connected to a positive source of energy that provides motivation.

- How do you get feedback on your grantmaking program?
- Are you able to stay close to the people and programs at the center of your work?
- How isolated are you in your work?
- Where are your sources of cognitive support? Emotional support?
- How do you keep yourself engaged and motivated?
- What do you do to refresh yourself when you find yourself burning out?

Action

- Decide on one professional development goal and how you will achieve it.

- Identify the barriers to being able to stay the course. Which are due to you and which are primarily influenced by your working environment?

General Resources

Cameron, Julia. 1992. *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher/Perigee.

Draper, Lee. Get Out of Your Rut, *Foundation News and Commentary*, January/February 2002, volume 43, number 1.

GrantCraft, www.grantcraft.org. *GrantCraft*, a project of the Ford Foundation, collects and shares practical information from grantmakers in a wide variety of foundations on the tools and skills they use to be effective.

Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, www.geofunders.org, particularly engages philanthropies interested in evaluation and knowledge management.

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