

Nonprofit 'creativity' we can do without

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If you're familiar with the inner workings of nonprofit organizations, chances are you have heard of, used or done some "creative" budgeting, proposal writing, or reporting.

Understandably, it's one of those things nonprofit veterans rarely discuss.

Such "creative" exercises are some of the ways a considerable number of nonprofits cope with limited resources to cover unglamorous expenses such as staff salaries, rent and office supplies, as well as important programs they couldn't get funding for.

Nonprofits that use these strategies aren't exactly lying, but neither are they being fully truthful.

No, it's not ideal behavior, but it's a learned response to foundation practices.

Most leaders of these nonprofits are acting on the best interest of their constituents, their organizations and the broader community.

Restricted project-specific grants continue to dominate foundation giving in the United States.

A recent report by the Center for Effective Philanthropy noted that a majority of foundations provide "less than 20 percent of their grantees with operating support."

Both project and unrestricted grants play important roles in ensuring the effectiveness and impact of nonprofits and, consequently, of foundation giving.

But there is an imbalance in how most foundations are allocating their grant dollars.

Over the years, various individuals and organizations have tried to boost foundation funding for organizational operations but have been unable to sustain interest and muster support from enough of U.S. grantmaking institutions to create the cultural shift that such a change entails.

The roadblocks to change are big and impressive.

Nonprofits and foundations need to address fears and concerns, dispel myths and build relationships.

But foundations like the California Wellness Foundation, the F. B. Heron Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the New York Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation, the Scherman Foundation, the Sobrato Family Foundation and the William Penn Foundation are demonstrating that grantees and funders together can overcome these roadblocks.

All of us in the nonprofit sector play a role in pushing for change, building on the pioneering spirit of these courageous foundations that have found ways to increase general-support grantmaking.

We need to mobilize and create a strategy for change.

To start, nonprofit and foundation leaders should engage each other in an open dialogue.

Conference planners should put the topic of general support grantmaking on the agenda for their next convening.

Foundation program officers, executives and trustees should discuss this issue honestly, examine their own behavior and make changes when necessary.

Are you tired of using the "creative" pen to meet overhead costs and improve your organization's ability to successfully respond to crises and opportunities to serve your constituency?

Then make your voice heard.

Aaron Dorfman is executive director and Kristina C. Moore is communications associate at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, which recently released a report, "[A Call to Action: Organizing to Increase the Effectiveness and Impact of Foundation Grantmaking.](#)"

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