

“Grantmaking is an art, not a science.”

What does that mean? It means that there’s not one way to do things that’s always right. It means that we will occasionally make mistakes, but as long as we use our hearts and our minds, our skills as grantmakers will continue to grow and improve.

The process of grantmaking begins and ends with the proposal. In between, is *due diligence* — site visits, learning about the issues and organizations that are requesting funds, asking questions, etc. The purpose of this little primer is to provide you with tools that can help you evaluate grant proposals effectively.

What makes a good grant? At least six criteria need to be fulfilled to make a good grant. They are:

- Clarity of purpose
- Sensibility of process
- Do-ability
- Leadership
- Realistic financial projections
- Monitoring

CLARITY OF PURPOSE

Good proposals say very clearly...

- *what* needs to be done
- *how* the task will be accomplished *where* the project fits within the field
- *who* will be affected by it
- *how* it will achieve its goals
- *how* the funder will know whether the predicted results have happened

A SENSIBLE PROCESS

Look at a proposal from the point of view of the question “Are they going about doing the job right?”

- Can the goals be accomplished in the time frame laid out?
- Are there too many (or too few) people involved to provide the confidence that the process will be effective?

It is also important to ask whether the process has feedback built into it so that once the project is up and running both the funder (that’s you) and grantee (that’s the organization) can determine if problems are arising.

DO-ABILITY

Do-ability needs to be looked at within the overall financial, organizational, and programmatic health of an organization.

- Does the proposal grant match resources available?
- Is the amount of people-power, money, and time allocated sensibly and well, so the organization has the best chance of achieving the purpose of the requested grant?

LEADERSHIP

- Can the key personnel (the leaders of the organization) get the job done?
- Does the organization have the “troops” to make the project happen?

Some nonprofit organizations are small and thin. Others are big and strong. There is no “right way” for a nonprofit to be.

REALISTIC FINANCIAL PROJECTIONS

- Do the project’s dollars add up?
- What happens if only 80% of the budget can be raised — what will be its effect on the proposed project?
- Do the salaries (or partial salaries) of key staff, as well as travel and other expenses make you think the dollars are in the right place?

MONITORING

Monitoring is not the same as evaluation, which happens after a project has been completed. Monitoring is more narrow and short-range, and focuses on how specific tasks detailed in the project are being done. Monitoring asks whether the organization most likely will achieve the results it wants.

In addition to the six criteria discussed above, a proposal might have other attractive characteristics. When some or most of these characteristics are present, a good project can turn out to be a super one. Among these characteristics are:

- The *uniqueness* of the project in the field
- Its power to *leverage additional monies* (if we give it \$5000, the organization will be able to get a matching grant of \$5000 from someone else)
 - Its potential for *replicability* (the project can be recreated in another place to serve even more people)
- Its chances of *sustaining itself* without additional grant funds
 - Its likelihood of *changing the way the ‘field’ looks at itself or does business*
- Its ability to create *learning* opportunities between the funders and the grantee organization

No one ever said that being a philanthropist was easy! It takes time and energy, and it can sometimes even be frustrating. But as long as you always remember that you are doing this to make great things happen in the lives of other people, it can also be one of the most rewarding things you will ever do. Good luck!