FINDING A FOCUS FOR YOUR PHILANTHROPY

By Suzanne Hammer, Hammer & Associates

At Hammer & Associates, we meet with a lot of family office leaders and donors who are interested in or actively practicing philanthropy. They ask questions such as: What is the best strategy in philanthropy? How can my family and I agree on something that will keep us together over time? How can I achieve the best results for my community or funding area—while staying true to what I'm passionate about?

It's difficult yet necessary to choose among the many good causes to fund. Family offices and donors may think it's best to fund many causes rather than narrow it down to one or two. After all, isn't it better to fund more than less? Yet if you ask how to achieve the most good with a family office or foundation's limited resources, you may answer the question differently.

Many family offices and foundations realize they can only achieve real and lasting impact in a few areas. They must focus their giving on specific causes, communities, or geographical areas. Some people call this being strategic about their philanthropy. Strategic philanthropy is a term that gets used a lot in the field, often with different meanings. At the heart of it, being strategic simply means finding a focus based on community needs, setting specific goals within that focus, and having a thoughtful process to gauge how well you met those goals.

Simply because you decide to be strategic about your philanthropy, doesn't mean you stop being responsive to needs. Some funders maintain a portion of their grantmaking portfolio to responsive grantmaking, giving them the flexibility to make grants as needs in the community arise. Others offer their board or family members discretionary grants, earmarking a certain dollar amount per member to use for their own personal passions or specific to their local city or town. This allows the philanthropy overall to stay mission-driven, while making sure board or family members stay engaged and interested.

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Scanning the Landscape
With all the worthy causes to support, how will you and your family decide where to focus?

One of the ways to find a focus in philanthropy is through what's called a landscape scan. Landscape scans are tools funders use to look at a given field or issue area to identify the needs, opportunities, and gaps in funding. They then use this information to guide their giving and strategy decisions and understand how the family office can be most effective in its philanthropy.

When you want to make sure your philanthropic giving will be relevant and effective, you can look across the field for needs and opportunities. In doing so, you will find causes, partners, or ways to plug in that you may not have known about before. Finding these opportunities and understanding how a given field works is called "scanning the landscape." Many use this term in philanthropy, and at its most basic, it simply means "doing your research to determine where and how to give your resources."

For new funders, landscape scans can provide more understanding about existing funders, players, and opportunities in any given issue area and provide diverse viewpoints. For seasoned funders, they can provide updates and comparative data about ongoing developments and needs and help the funder assess impact, explore new strategies, and course correct as needed.

Scans can be done in many ways that fit your time, budget, and operating style. They can be informal phone interviews, surveys, a study of research, press clippings, and field journals, or more complex and structured study or focus group. They don't have to be long and complicated—they simply need to answer the questions to want to learn.

How to Get Started on a Landscape Scan
Some donors conduct a needs assessment when they are figuring out their philanthropic mission or focus area. Others scan the landscape once or twice a year to inform their strategies. Some conduct the needs assessments themselves, while others hire skilled philanthropy advisors or firms to do the research for them.

To get started on your philanthropic landscape scan, it helps to think through and discuss the following questions as a family, staff, or board. Ask yourselves:

What are the most important questions we want to answer?

Who are the best people or organizations to find answers?

What methods will we use to conduct the landscape scan (e.g., interviews, a literature reviews, a focus group, a combination?)

How will we respectfully engage them as part of this process?

How will we identify our own blind spots and assumptions?

What support do we need from colleagues, experts, and/or philanthropic advisors?

How will we use the data to inform our own strategies and decision making?

Landscape Scans Build Lasting Relationships
Landscape scans do more than collect information; they are also a way to make connections and build relationships with others in the field you wish to support. It will help you to get to know other people and organizations, test ideas, and get feedback before funding them. The people in the field are the ones who know best about what's needed. It always helps to ask "who else should I be speaking to about this?" Many people will happily share their contacts or additional ideas to consider.

It helps to conduct landscape scans on a regular basis to keep your learning and relationships relevant. The most effective family philanthropists are the ones who never assume anything, and who never stop asking questions about how they can best support the causes and communities they care most about.

Suzanne Hammer of Hammer & Associates gives family offices the tools they need to engage in and connect with their philanthropy—helping philanthropic individuals and families pair their passion with proven strategies. To learn more, download her EngagedPhilanthropy™ guides – including a new one on Finding Focus and Scanning the Landscape – at SuzanneHammer.com
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