

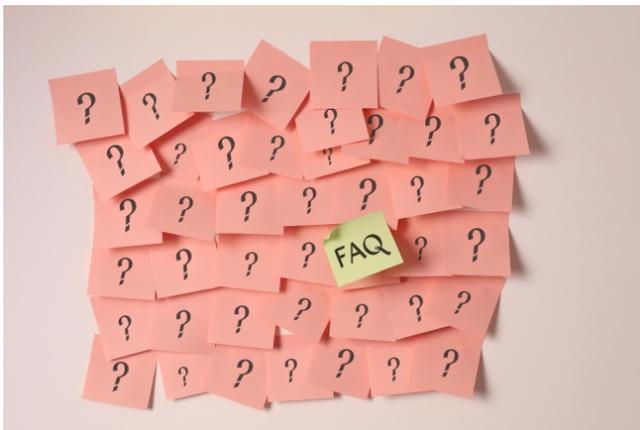
ADVICE

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Ask an Expert: Grant Seeking in the Pandemic

By Eden Stiffman



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In this week's edition of "Ask an Expert," we answer reader questions about grant seeking during the pandemic.

Jessamyn Shams-Lau, co-chief executive officer of the Peery Foundation, and Patricia McIlreavy, CEO of the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, provide the answers. (You can hear more from them in a *Chronicle webinar* hosted last week.)

What else are you trying to figure out in the midst of the pandemic? Send us your questions about fundraising, management challenges, and more, and we'll track down the right experts to answer them. Submit your questions to askanexpert@philanthropy.com, and we'll answer a couple each week. Let us know if you'd like to remain anonymous.

As a nonprofit seeking funding, how do we strike a balance between portraying how dire the current situation is and not appearing too dire? We of course want to be transparent, but what funder wants to support what may be perceived as a sinking ship?

— Fundraiser for a child and family development nonprofit

"The role trust plays in transparency cannot be overestimated," says McIlreavy. Organizations can build trust through strong, long-lasting relationships. But few have the privilege of that position with all of their donors.

Sharing hard truths will not always yield positive results, but failing to be transparent carries the risk that you do not get what you actually require to fix the situation, she says. Still, your level of openness should depend on the relationship you have with a grant maker and the way the foundation operates, she says. Ideally, grant seekers should look to share as much of their situation as possible,



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while making sure what they say matches the tone set by the grant maker, Shams-Lau says. Take cues from language on the foundation's website, program officers' communications, their GrantAdvisor profile, and any other information you can glean about how well they understand nonprofit work, Shams-Lau says.

Consider asking current or past grantees of the foundation you're approaching for insight into what they do with challenging information, she says. Do they have a history of empathizing with nonprofits? If you have reservations about how truth will be perceived, then look for more subtle ways to share urgency, she adds.

For instance, emphasize the strengths you built and exhibited before the Covid-19 pandemic. Highlight measurement and evaluation data that support the importance of your work now or in the recovery phase of the crisis, Shams-Laus says.

Lead with why people have invested in your work, and name-drop. Who else has funded you, what credible names are board members, advisers, or partners? "Help funders see that in supporting you they would not be alone and, in fact, in company that inspires confidence," she says.

McIlreavy agrees that demonstrating diversity in funding will help build trust.

"No one donor wishes to feel that your future rests entirely on their grant-making decisions, and this is especially true in the midst of a crisis," she says.

If you can demonstrate to your donors how you are using their funding to balance the measures you're taking to maintain the health of your organization, she says, you are in a good position to engage them in supporting your work.

Given we've received a number of grants for programming now suspended due to Covid-19, do you have any suggestions as to how we should approach those funders to repurpose those dollars to a now more urgent need?

— Associate development director at a Louisiana science and math education group

Help the foundation understand that the original purpose is still important but to further the original goals or project, you have to get through the uncertainty and unique challenges presented by Covid-19, Shams-Lau says. Highlight the importance of general operating support when you're still figuring out how your organization is navigating an uncertain future.

She recommends talking to the grant maker about this topic rather than sending an email.

This might be an opportunity to highlight the Council on Foundations pledge signed by more than 750 foundations committing to be more flexible, including loosening or eliminating restrictions on current grants, they say.

If your donor has signed the pledge, this would be a great starting point for the conversation, exploring how providing greater flexibility will allow you to respond most appropriately, McIlreavy says.

If the foundation aren't open to converting its grant to unrestricted support, "be prepared to talk about something specific that you want to spend the grant on that enables the funder to feel like a hero," Shams-Lau says. Explain how this item or set of items will give you the best chance of coming out of this crisis in a strong position, she adds. Why is it essential to whatever aspect of your work they are most interested in? How will it enable you to come back to the project the grant was originally earmarked for?

McIlreavy recommends looking at how the foundation could help you adapt your programming to diminish the impact of the coronavirus on your mission. If your programs can't be adapted, ask your donors to consider bridge funding so you can get going again when the crisis is over. Make sure the grant maker understands that program suspensions or alterations affect more than the activities themselves. Explain your standing operational needs and the resources that the programs bring toward covering costs such as rent or shared staff. Restarting after a suspension can be more costly than ongoing maintenance of a nonprofit.

With so many grant applications focused on organizational and programmatic goals and outcomes, what's a good strategy to approach these types of questions when so many components of the upcoming year are uncertain or unknown?

— Grant writer for a dance company in Texas

Organizations will have to reframe their 2020 and 2021 goals within the context of Covid-19, Shams-Lau says. Consider these questions: What's the opportunity for you to use this crisis to make more progress or move faster than previously planned? How will your organization support the clients you have as they navigate an uncertain future? What degree of certainty, solidarity, or service can you offer that will help heal communities? What does your community need coming out of this?

"Chances are this is some version of your original 2020 goals that are now sharpened in focus or timeline due to the crisis," she says.

McIlreavy advises that organizations would be well served by noting what assumptions they are making in their planning that would affect program goals and outcomes if they don't pan out.

That means thinking through scenarios like whether other funding comes through or stay-at-home orders are relaxed. You should also note the risks that would hinder success. These might be the opposite of your assumptions (you don't receive additional funding, for example), but they could be even broader (a second wave of stay-at-home orders is put in place).

As you implement your programs and put the funder's support to work, keep in touch with them as things become more clear, McIlreavy says. "This allows them to have confidence that you are attentive to their needs, as well as stewarding their funds responsibly."

Many funders are giving only to existing grantees. How does an organization best propose a valuable and meaningful project to a funder who doesn't know us? What is a good strategy under the circumstances? And with so many funders saying they don't take unsolicited proposals, how do we get our foot in the door to even make a pitch?

— An Oregon-based fundraising consultant

During crises, remember that some funders may withdraw to their known partners, but others may expand and increase their relationships, McIlreavy says. Write to those you've sought out before, ask how they are managing in the crisis, and remind them of what you are doing. Ask for that meeting. With remote working and changed paces, it just might work.

When you're trying to broaden your pool of supporters, research the grant makers and donors that align with your mission.

As you're doing your research, look at who they have funded in the past. Work the relationships you have to gain an introduction to the donor. If a current grantee recommends the funder talk to you, it could be a strong way to get a foot in the door, Shams-Lau says.

If this is not feasible, ask the funder for an informational session. Use this opportunity to build your relationship and allow the donor to gain a greater understanding of your program and possible alignments with their own goals, McIlreavy says. Remember that this can take time, and patience may be required before a pitch is feasible.

And when you do approach new supporters, make sure you connect your work to the populations they already serve.

For instance, you're approaching a grant maker that supports education programs. In this moment, the students and families supported by the foundation's grantees might only be able to keep accessing education programs if your organization's work helps them stay in their homes during the economic crisis. "Help funders see how issues aren't siloed and separate but connected and interdependent," Shams-Lau says.

"For us to come out of this better, as a sector, we have to use this opportunity to put any competition and individualism aside to ensure communities get the holistic and most important support in this moment."

Catch up on recent editions of the column .

This article is part of:

COVID-19 COVERAGE: INNOVATION AND HOW-TO ADVICE , ASK AN EXPERT: NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC, COVID-19 COVERAGE: FUNDRAISING DURING THE PANDEMIC

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