A TOOLKIT FOR FUNDERS AND NONPROFITS

Great Grantmaker-Grantseeker Relationships

GrantED

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This tool, which can be used by both grantmakers and grantseekers, is adapted by GrantED from one created by Exponent Philanthropy in partnership with the National Council of Nonprofits, with support of the Fund for Shared Insight. The original tool was formulated in 2017; this adaptation was completed in 2021. The partners in this endeavor include:

GrantED – a joint project of the Jewish Funders Network and UpStart that works to strengthen relationships between grantmakers and grantseekers in the Jewish community.

Jewish Funders Network is an international community of private foundations and philanthropists whose mission is to promote meaningful giving and to improve philanthropy in the Jewish world.

UpStart inspires and empowers leaders to dream, build, and grow bold initiatives that enhance the vitality of Jewish life.

Exponent Philanthropy – is a member led community of lean funders where foundation leaders and individual funders learn and inspire one another to make exponential impact

National Council of Nonprofits – is a trusted resource and proven advocate for America's nonprofits.

Fund for Shared Insight – is a national funder collaborative seeking to improve philanthropy by promoting high quality listening and feedback in the service of equity.

In 2017, Exponent Philanthropy and the National Council of Nonprofits set out to explore the complicated relationship between funders and nonprofits by bringing together hundreds of funders and nonprofits to listen, learn, and improve the relationship from both sides. The original toolkit is based on what they learned during these events and is designed to help grantmakers and grantseekers understand the hallmarks of great funder–nonprofit relationships, assess their competencies in these areas, and identify ways in which they might improve. The adaptation provided by GrantED seeks to increase the relevance of this tool for the Jewish landscape.

THE HALLMARKS OF GREAT RELATIONSHIPS

Often in the complex funder-nonprofit relationship, it seems that nonprofits do the asking, reporting, and proving, while donors sit in positions to say yes or no, how much, when, and what's required.

Achieving a different, deeper relationship takes more than just good intentions—it requires flexibility, finesse, and a sincere desire to acknowledge and address the power dynamics at play.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim, a 19th-century Polish Hasidic thinker is credited with saying the following: "Everyone must have two pockets with a note in each pocket so that he or she can reach into one or the other, depending on the need.

When feeling depressed, discouraged, or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket and there find the words:

בשבילי העולם נברא

Bishvili nivra ha-olam

For me the world was created (BT Sanhedrin).

But when feeling high and mighty, one should reach into the left pocket and find the words:

ואנכי עפר ואפר

V'anochi afar v'efer

I am but dust and ashes.

To achieve strong relationships, grantmakers and grantseekers must be mindful of both postures — humility and confidence. The two are not a binary; they are a balancing act. Both grantmakers and grantseekers hold power in their relationship and both must practice humility — listening deeply, questioning certainty, operating from a place of curiosity.

A model for us to draw on in buildinging strong grantmaker/grantseeker relationships in the Jewish community is that of "hevruta" (study partners). Hevruta is an age-old Jewish learning practice of shared study that is understood as an expression of a covenantal relationship. The hevruta relationship is infused with respect, purpose, resilience, and creativity. Grantmakers and grantseekers must maintain an awareness that we always have something to contribute and something to learn. [1]

[1] Pedagogy of Partnership Dr. Orit Kent and Allison Cook

Our time spent with funders and nonprofits reveals these hallmarks of strong relationships:

Mutual Trust

(*Emun Hadadi*, אֵמוּן הֲדָדִי)

Trust is the cornerstone of any great relationship — in philanthropy or elsewhere. Trust increases over time as you get to know the other person and develop a clear sense of who they are and what motivates them.

Humility

(*Anavah*, עֲנָוָה)

In a relationship, having humility and empathy for your partner opens the door for open and honest feedback.

Communication

(*Tikshoret*, תִקְשׁוֹרֶת)

Communication is essential in building healthy, long-lasting, and open relationships.

Shared Expertise

(*Mumchiyut Mishutefet*, מֻמְחִיוּת מְשֻׁתֶּפֶת)

Both funders and nonprofits can benefit from taking a step back and listening to one another's insights.

Tolerance for Discomfort

(*Sovlanut L'Einochut*, סוֹבְלָנוּת בְּמַצְבֵי אִי נוחות)

The power dynamic between funders and nonprofits can be burdensome for both. Each side must be willing to do the work necessary to build a strong, healthy relationship.

Creating space to explore these competencies with those involved in your philanthropy will set you on a path to transform your philanthropy from transactional to transformational. In the following pages, you'll find a diagnostic meant to assess the state of your relationships as grantmakers and grantseekers. Since every relationship is different, we encourage you to take the diagnostic with a specific relationship in mind.

You'll also find tactics for improving aspects of your funder–nonprofit relationships.

SELF-DIAGNOSTIC

Below are potential hallmarks of great funder–nonprofit relationships that can help you identify opportunities for improvement. For each statement, place an X in the column that best describes the frequency with which you demonstrate the behavior.

HALLMARK	NEVER	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
MUTUAL TRUST אֵמוּן הֲדָדִי				
I work to build a genuine relationship with others.				
I assume the best intentions in others.				
I follow through on requests in a timely manner.				
I care about others' personal and professional well-being.				
HUMILITY עֲנָוָה				
When making decisions, I seek to include the perspectives of those we serve.				
I seek to truly understand, and not assume, how others view issues.				
I consciously check my ego.				
PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION תִקשוֹרֶת				
I encourage and enable regular communication within and outside of the grant process.				
I actively listen to others' ideas and concerns.				
I set and share realistic expectations for the relationship.				
I am clear and direct in my intentions and needs.				
SHARED EXPERTISE מֻמְחִיּוּת מְשֻׁתֶּפֶת				
I seek out and share relevant knowledge and information, as well as opportunities and challenges, in a timely manner.				
I strive to become more knowledgeable by learning from others' experiences and perspectives.				
I welcome and acknowledge the value of others' knowledge and experience.				
TOLERANCE FOR DISCOMFORT סוֹבְלָנוּת בְּמַצְּבֵי אִי נוֹחוּת				
I acknowledge to others when I have made a mistake or when priorities/expectations are misaligned.				
I seek feedback on ways I can improve the relationship, and I then act upon it.				
I acknowledge the existence of the power dynamic and actively work to minimize it.				

Based on your answers on the previous page, select at least one of the five hallmarks for improvement. If you selected Never or Sometimes more than twice within any hallmark, consider prioritizing that area for improvement.

For example, if you selected "I never seek feedback on ways I can improve the relationship," and "I never acknowledge to others when I have made a mistake," you may want to prioritize your tolerance for discomfort in relationships with your funders or grantees.

Write your chosen hallmark(s) here:

Then use the pages that follow to explore tactics for improvement:

Mutual Trust, page 10

Humility, page 11

Proactive Communication, page 12

Shared Expertise, page 13

Tolerance for Discomfort, page 14

TACTICS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Mutual Trust

"One of the things I wish I had realized earlier in my career is that we don't need to do things the way they have always been done. As grantmakers, we need to be willing to experiment and take risks. There is a growing desire — from both grantmakers and grantseekers — to engage in trust-based philanthropy, and that is something the Foundation is committed to cultivating."

—Vanessa Bernier, Program Officer for Jewish Life at the Denver-based Rose Community Foundation.

A fundamental step in bridging the divide between funder and grantee is for funders to acknowledge they have more power overall and to recognize that they must go first to build trust. However, grantees should also be aware of areas in which they have more power (such as greater knowledge about what is happening on the ground) and be careful to use this power wisely.

Funders and nonprofits offer these suggestions:

- Engage in radical candor, which means challenging someone directly while also showing that you care for them personally.
- Funders should award multiyear, general operating grants to build staff capacity at nonprofits. Trust the nonprofits to do their jobs well; don't micromanage them.
- Find ways to share expectations and reach a common understanding about any collaborative activities.
- Be less defensive and open to the bigger picture beyond individual programs. Grantseekers should convey the true cost of doing business. Funders should invest in the organization with an understanding of those true costs.
- Grantseekers should share their needs and priorities. Funders should seek to understand the limitations on nonprofits' resources (e.g., time, staff, technology).
- Deepen your engagement by participating in events/saying "yes" to invitations from nonprofits. Nonprofits should say "yes" to invitations from funders.
- Funders and nonprofits should introduce their board members to one another in order to educate the trustees about issues and educate the nonprofits about the trustees' interests and priorities.
- Frame conversations beyond what is being funded.

My action steps:

Humility

"When I became Moishe House's CEO, I didn't know what a CEO was or what a CEO did. One day I was working on a project, and the next day I had a business card that said 'CEO.' We were trying to figure out how to be an organization and not just a program. I met Jim Heeger, and he invited me to visit him at his office. We would work things out on his whiteboard. Jim's biggest gift is that he asks the right questions, and we needed that, because we didn't know the right questions to ask. It helps that Jim is not stuck in his ways and is forgiving. He might have an end goal, but he never states that end goal; he just tries to get us there. There are times when it has taken longer than I think he would want for us to get to a certain place or move in a certain direction, but he doesn't hold it against me."

—David Cygielman, Founder and CEO of Moishe House, speaking about his relationship with Jim Heeger, a mentor, Board Chair, and funder.

My action steps:

Because the ultimate goal of philanthropy is to serve the end user , not ourselves, funders and nonprofit leaders must minimize their egos. Remember that all involved are committed to action and positive change.

Funders and nonprofits offer these suggestions:

For funders:

- Meet grantees where they are — either on-site at their location or at a local coffee shop. Coming to them shifts the power dynamic and also enables you to see their program and operations.
- Ask the nonprofit about its needs — and listen to the answer.
- Treat nonprofit grantees as individuals; don't assume all are the same.
- Lift up nonprofits in conversations with other interested parties.
- To avoid wasting the grantseeker's time, only request what information you need to make grant decisions, even if it means searching online for additional details yourself.

For nonprofits:

- Ask funders about their priorities and limitations — and listen to the answer.
- Treat funders as individuals; don't assume they are all the same.

For both:

- Listen deeply to the other's concerns.
- Try to see things from the other's point of view.
- Assume best intentions.
- Share mistakes.
- Frame conversations beyond what is being funded.
- Set enough time aside for meetings. Don't be rushed; take time to be relaxed.
- Open your doors; host a small reception to invite grantees or funders into your space.

Proactive Communication

"I try to communicate as clearly and frequently as I can. One of our recent strategy shifts was to do more programming through partnerships. It was hard to figure out which partnerships made sense. Vanessa has deep knowledge of the community and a bird's-eye view of what is happening. She helped me to identify and make connections to potential partners. The more we communicate, the more we can lean on her as a resource to achieve our mission."

—Jory Hanselman Mayschak, Co-Founder and Executive Director of BaMidbar Wilderness Therapy, speaking about her relationship with Vanesa Bernier, Program Officer for Jewish Life at the Denver-based Rose Community Foundation.

My action steps:

Intentional, open communication channels and feedback loops lead to more clarity and stronger relationships.

Funders and nonprofits offer these suggestions:

For funders:

- Communicate honestly and openly about grant requirements.
- Keep nonprofits informed throughout the grant process; start by acknowledging receipt of a letter of inquiry or a grant application.
- Welcome emails and phone calls, or hold "office hours" so that nonprofits can visit or call during a set time.
- Remember that a prompt "no" is the best kind; when appropriate, offer feedback on declined grants.
- Use grant agreements to document the grant's goals in writing.
- Incorporate into the reporting process questions that ask about the relationship. Be interactive and feedback-friendly.

For nonprofits:

- Communicate proactively about changes to programs and timelines.
- Share failures and lessons learned.
- Invite funders to see the program in action.
- Review grant agreements carefully and stay on top of the requirements.
- Share candid feedback about the relationship so that it can continue to improve.

For both:

- Develop a communications calendar together with grantees so both parties know when you will be talking to one another.

Shared Expertise

"We are deeply interested in learning about the successes and the challenges the grantees are facing and how they are responding as they implement their project. We know just how dynamic the work is on the ground, and we want to support our grantees as they consider adapting the original project design when things are not working as anticipated. In addition, we are interested in understanding what this learning could mean for the field. The reporting protocols create an opportunity for reflection so that we can learn, the grantee can learn, and potentially the field can learn. We also see this teaching as going both ways — we learn from our grantees and our grantees learn from us. Part of the duty and responsibility of philanthropic professionals is to gather and share knowledge."

— Joni Blinderman, Associate Director of the Covenant Foundation*, a New York-based foundation.*

My action steps:

Finding opportunities for nonprofits and funders to learn together can level the playing field and open a new part of your relationship.

Funders and nonprofits offer these suggestions:

For funders:

- Convene grantees in-person or via webinar — outside the grant process — to discuss shared interests.
- Connect grantees with resources and thought leaders (such as state associations of nonprofits that promote best practices).
- Introduce the foundation's board members to the nonprofit leaderships to educate the trustees about issues and educate the nonprofits about the trustees' interests and priorities.
- Deepen your engagement by participating in events/saying "yes" to invitations from nonprofits.
- Share information about your process.
- Respect the nonprofit's knowledge.
- Understand the distinction between long-term and short-term volunteerism.
- Make sure nonprofits receive advocacy and fundraising training so they can be more self-sufficient in resource development and accessing government funding.
- Reflect on who else needs to be in the room when conversations happen with nonprofits. Can you connect the nonprofit with government, researchers, other nonprofits, and other funders?

For nonprofits:

- Initiate conversations about the field that help the funder to understand the broader context in which you operate.
- Ask funders to help you with connections, information, and other non-financial resources.
- Create opportunities for your funders to meet with your board and constituents.
- Help funders to understand the organization's evolving needs as it grows and matures.

For both:

- Find ways to share expectations and reach a common understanding about any collaborative activities.

Tolerance for Discomfort

"At foundations we are often reluctant to start a conversation because it might not end in a grant. How much time are you going to put into those early conversations where you don't yet know if it is the right fit? What we learned is that those early conversations teach us a lot about the fit."

—Ben Callif, Research and Mindset Director of the Milwaukee-based Bader Philanthropies

Tolerating the discomfort of critical feedback, and turning that feedback into action, are evidence that the parties in a relationship are working hard to improve it.

Funders and nonprofits offer these suggestions:

For funders:

- Show respect for failure so nonprofits are more confident about sharing lessons learned.
- Audit the relationship; ask about the people, not only about the grant.
- Give specific feedback to nonprofits about why they didn't receive a grant.
- Be as flexible as possible.
- Have a conversation with the nonprofit prior to it submitting a proposal, so it won't waste time preparing a proposal if it is not likely to be funded.

For nonprofits:

- Share failures as well as success
- Take time to give feedback on the relationship.
- Accept feedback — constructive as well as positive.
- Adhere to grant questions and formats; ask for clarification if you don't understand the question or request.

For both:

- Be interactive and feedback-friendly.
- Ask, don't assume.

My action steps:

KEY SKILLS

Taking into consideration the results of your self-diagnostic, consider how two key skills — asking powerful questions and listening well — can improve your relationships in any given area.

Asking Powerful Questions

Powerful questions are thought-provoking, open-ended, and curious in nature. They are not complex or lengthy, and they give power to the other person to talk freely and deeply about a topic. Choose from this list of powerful "go-to" questions that will enable you to go beyond evaluations and grant reports to see the other person in front of you. While the funder is often in the driver's seat in terms of setting the agenda for meetings, you may want to try creating space in meetings for both the grantmaker and grantseeker to ask questions and lead parts of the conversation.

This section on questions is adapted from previous work by Jen Lachman for Exponent Philanthropy.

Questions for getting started:

- What would you like to focus on today?
- What's important to you about this topic?

Questions for exploring a topic:

- What opportunities can you see?
- What assumptions are you making?
- What is your desired outcome?
- In a few years from now, what will you want to say about this situation?
- In the larger scheme of things, how important is this to you?
- What's the real challenge for you here?

Questions for creating forward movement:

- What's your stretch goal?
- What would it take to create change in this situation?
- Who do you need to create change?
- What support do you need to accomplish...?

Questions for closing:

- What's emerging for you here?
- What new connections are you making?
- What insights have you gained?
- What's been most useful to you during our conversation?
- What will you do next, by when, and how will you let me know?

Questions for when you're stumped:

- As you talk through this, what are you noticing?
- What are you curious about?

Listening Well

Listening is an essential skill for effective philanthropy. When — and only when — we listen deeply and humbly to one another, we learn about their true needs and how we can partner most effectively to create change.

Unfortunately, most people are not as good at listening as they'd like to think. Listening deeply to another person takes real focus and attention, and our multitasking brains and fast-paced environments present endless distractions that make it hard for us to really tune in.

The following are strategies to help you be a good listener when in conversations with representatives of nonprofits:

- Be curious— What are you truly curious to uncover about this person, and his or her unique perspective? When you come to a conversation seeking to understand things in a new way, and can recognize that your vantage point offers only one way of seeing a situation, you're able to tune in more intently.
- Be humble—Many of us feel most comfortable entering a conversation with a certain level of confidence about the topic at hand and our ability to offer value to the discussion. So, while it may be uncomfortable, when you can let go of your desire to advise, drive, and direct a conversation, you make space for others to speak — and you can focus on listening. Next time you notice yourself wanting to offer advice in a conversation, consider asking a question instead.
- Be present—Deep listening requires you to be fully present in the current moment. Often we enter conversations with a million other thoughts swirling around in our heads. Before a conversation in which you're committed to deep listening, take a few minutes to slow down and transition. During the conversation, know that your mind likely will wander multiple times, and, when it does, tune right back in to the person who is speaking.

GrantED

GrantED is a joint project of Jewish Funders Network and UpStart that works to strengthen relationships between grantmakers and grantseekers in the Jewish community.

Grantmakers:
Foundation professionals, trustees, or individual donors involved in the process of allocating grants to nonprofit organizations in order to achieve positive outcomes and impacts for the Jewish community and the world.

Grantseekers:
Nonprofit leaders pursuing grant allocations to support activities that achieve positive outcomes and impact for the Jewish community and the world.

GrantED creates and curates articles, tools, and other materials to inspire and inform grantmakers and grantseekers in the Jewish community. We organize these around four core interdependent components of successful grantmaking partnerships: sustaining impact, relationship building, communication and power dynamics. GrantED also offers workshops, facilitated conversations and other programs.

Visit GrantED at www.jgranted.org to learn more and sign up for our mailing list.

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