

Strategic Doesn't Have To Be a Bad Word

By Sara Beggs, ASF

The fundamental tenets of strategic philanthropy are that funders and their grantees should have clear goals, strategies based on sound theories of change, and robust methods for assessing progress toward their goals.—Paul Brest, former president of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and advocate of strategic philanthropy

Recent [debates among philanthropic thought leaders](#) question whether a *strategic* approach to philanthropy will indeed create the greatest impact.

To process and evaluate the criticisms, Janis Reischmann, executive director of [Hau'oli Mau Loa Foundation](#) and member of ASF's [Impact Working Group](#), worked through the common critiques below. Here's where she landed.

Critique: When we practice strategic philanthropy, we're closed to new ideas.

I do think there's a discipline in practicing strategic philanthropy that requires one to stay the course, but **that doesn't mean that within "the course," new ideas won't surface and emerge.** Also, if there's a mechanism in place for getting feedback and making mid-course adjustments, we should be innovating and adding ideas regularly.

In our foundation, since we don't receive proposals except from those we invite, we try to respond to every inquiry we receive —this way, we remain open to new ideas and get information about emerging issues in the community. Also, we don't create "the course" on our own—we engage multiple community stakeholders around what we might work on and how we might address an issue.

Critique: Strategic philanthropy is too focused on results and evidence. Grantmakers become contractors and their grantees, contractees with prescribed deliverables.

This concern has truth to it, but I see a continuum with lots of variation. In our foundation, we find Partners who want to work with us on an issue—an approach that requires a lot of give and take on both parts. **Indicators of success and measures of progress can (and, in my opinion, should) be developed jointly with the grantee. What impact are we both looking for? What are we both hoping to learn?** How will we know if we're on course? When targets aren't met, there's a discussion about what's going on and why, not an automatic discontinuation of funding.

Evidence is a thorny topic for me. Life is complex, and I don't believe every arena we work in has easy to obtain and sound evidence. But I do think relying on a mixed and multiple methods approach to collecting information about how the program is being implemented and what impacts are being seen is important. These findings can offer ideas for improving programs and foundation practices and creating greater impact.

Critique: Foundations that practice strategic philanthropy are too caught up in their own ideas and not responsive to the communities they should be serving.

This, to me, is a real potential problem and one we should always guard against. But it can be true whether we are a strategic grantmaker or not. **Given the few constituents who would criticize our work, we need to listen very carefully for feedback** about how we're doing and ensure we have formal and informal ways of staying in touch with the communities we serve. Surveying the landscape

periodically is a formal process to ensure we know what the issues are in the community, who the players are, and where the gaps are.

Critique: The problem is *issue du jour* leadership.

Whether practicing strategic philanthropy or not, **being fickle is a problem we all need to avoid.** Too often, foundations create an approach, try it for a year or two, and then get excited about a different approach. This leaves us less effective—we've gained knowledge and made connections in an area we are now abandoning—and we've likely affected a number of nonprofits whom we now leave in the lurch.

Foundations need to recognize that change doesn't always happen overnight. To make change, we often need to commit for the long haul. And even **if we aren't willing to or cannot commit for the long haul, then we need to be really mindful of the mess we may be making** among a group of grantees when we move into and then out of an issue area without warning or planning.

In the end, strategic philanthropy is like any philanthropy: When done with blinders on or taken to the extremes, it has poor results. The best of both worlds often lies in the middle.

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