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How to have a successful introductory meeting with a funder

By: Caroline Altman Smith

I have spent two decades as a program officer (PO) working at two different private foundations. In that time, I have had thousands of introductory conversations with nonprofit grantseekers to learn about their work and hear their pitches for support. It is a privilege to have the chance to meet with passionate nonprofit professionals who are busy changing the world. Many of these conversations are inspiring and invigorating. Some of them are less than thrilling and can even be frustrating. Some clear lessons have emerged over the course of these many conversations, and I offer them here in the hopes that they help you use a meeting like this to begin a beautiful friendship with a potential funder.

Before the meeting

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Confirm the date and time for the meeting at least a day or two in advance. I always appreciate it when folks send a simple bulleted agenda for our time together, and then ask if I have any feedback or anything to add. These agendas can be as simple as:

- *Introductions*
- *Overview of the work of our nonprofit*
- *Learning about your foundation's work in the field*
- *Next steps*

Having an agenda makes it clear that someone has thought through a plan for how this conversation is going to flow, and it's clear who is going to kick things off, manage the time, and take the lead. I always assume the nonprofit professionals will lead if they requested the meeting—and appreciate it when they make it clear that they've reviewed the foundation's website and are familiar with our giving priorities.

If there is something you want the PO to read in advance, attach it to this email. Shorter documents (one-to-two pages) are more likely to be read, especially if they are visually appealing and not too dense. If you send a 50-slide deck or your entire strategic plan, the odds are that those attachments are going to be opened and then closed immediately. Most POs can't spend a lot of time prepping for a first conversation, given the volume of these types of meetings. It's fine to send something at the last minute if you specify that you're going to walk the PO through it on the call.

During the meeting

Remember that this is a conversation and not a conference presentation. It's fine to go through a few slides, if they are carefully chosen with your audience in mind and convey information that would otherwise be hard to communicate. But I think the best introductory meetings are just that—the PO and the nonprofit getting to know each other and having a productive exploration of the fundraising Venn diagram: what the foundation is interested in funding, what the nonprofit needs funding for, and ideally, coming to a common understanding of that middle circle where you have mutual priorities. You are both trying to suss out how it might make sense to work together and what's in it for each of you. Often, grantseekers are so passionate about their work and eager to ensure that the PO understands how compelling it is, that they don't give space for the conversation to breathe. The best of these conversations are a back and forth with active listening and good questions on both sides.

Hopefully, the PO has done some homework and checked out your website, but you can't assume they know much about you. Start out by asking the PO how much they know about your topic area or organization, and then be ready to adjust on the fly to either back up and provide more context, or speed through the introduction and get into details more quickly if they are an expert in this area. Folks often skip this step and spend time telling me things I know, or assuming I know more than I do. Your PO is not out in the field every day the way you are and is likely not as experienced in your work as you think. This is especially true in foundations where one staff member might cover several topic areas, as is common in community foundations.

I find it useful to have the nonprofit ground me in their basics upfront. Many people gloss over key details. What is your North Star goal? How long has the organization existed? How many staff do you have? What's your annual budget? What are your primary sources of funding? What is your program model and who are you trying to help?

Watch the clock to ensure that you have time to say what you want to say, but also leave plenty of time for questions. You should also anticipate the PO wanting to ask questions throughout, which is a good sign of engagement. It would be rare to have a meeting longer than an hour, which means you don't have time to share long stories about your work, or many details. You need to hit the highlights of what you do, why it's important, the impact you have, why your organization is well (or even uniquely) positioned to do this work, what you need funding for, what that funding will accomplish, and what success will look like. Foundations need nonprofits in order to achieve their own strategic goals, and it can be helpful to speak to them in their own language (e.g., reference how they talk about their work on their website), so the funder can see their own priorities reflected in your work.

After the meeting

Hopefully the PO will be clear about the next steps, and it's fine to push to ensure you know what is expected to productively move the conversations along. If the call ends with the program officer unable to invite an application or suggest further engagement, it’s still nice to follow up with a brief email thanking the PO for their time. You never know when foundation strategies change (the dreaded “strategy refresh”), staff change, or your own work changes and new potential alignments develop.

If the PO requests a concept paper, make sure you know what the parameters are, so you don’t end up doing more work than is needed at an early stage. Send it on the agreed-upon timeline and in the agreed-upon format. Sending tons of additional documents and attachments is a lot for someone to wade through, and makes it less likely that any of it will be thoughtfully reviewed.

Hopefully these tips are useful the next time you score a meeting with a potential new funder. Keep it simple, keep it personal, prepare well, and follow up. It will hopefully be time well spent for you both.

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