



Fail vs. Flourish

3 Reasons Why Your New Funding Initiative Will Falter

I love developing new grant initiatives for foundations and individual philanthropists. There is nothing more exciting than identifying a problem where you have the potential to make a difference and then putting a plan in place to do just that. However, once the fanfare has subsided, I've noticed that many funder initiatives lose steam. Frustration builds as the approach that seemed so promising barely seems to make a dent in the problem, and certainly isn't delivering the results it should. Here are three reasons why funding initiatives can fail instead of flourish:

1. You didn't learn from others

Your new effort to ensure all children are reading by 3rd grade, transform public education in your state, or provide rural communities with access to health care might be new to you and your community, but I can guarantee you it or something similar has been tried before. The best investment you can make in the development of your initiative is to talk to people who have designed, launched and managed similar initiatives. At the very least, talk with them by phone. Ideally, you can organize members of your team to go on site visits. That's what we did when we helped the Cleveland Foundation organize a youth development initiative. We travelled to Providence, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and Baltimore — and asked one key question: "If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?" If you ask this question and implement their suggestions, I guarantee you will save your foundation time, save money, and achieve significantly greater impact, faster.

2. You aren't investing in communications

One of the most important — yet overlooked and underestimated — actions foundations can take to ensure the success of their grantmaking initiatives is to develop and implement a comprehensive communications plan at the very beginning stages of an initiative. In fact, one of my early lessons learned when I asked the question "If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?" was "Communications begins the moment you begin discussing your new initiative, so be sure to start planning a communications strategy immediately." This can be hard to do. In the beginning you're in the middle of planning and launching, which feels like building a plane and flying it at the same time. You're scrambling to assess needs, identify partners, get all the funding in place, and collect data. This means communications planning feels like a luxury. But your internal stakeholders (your team, board, grantees, key partners) need to be continuously informed and engaged, as do your many types of external stakeholders (which could range from parents to policymakers). In my experience, you don't prioritize communications planning now — and I do mean right now — you're going to pay the price a year, or five or ten years, from now when your grantees and partners aren't coordinated and are unable to stay on the same page, and stakeholders and other funders are confused by what you're trying to do.

3. You aren't anticipating complexity

If your initiative is successful, it will likely grow in size and complexity. You might expand into additional communities, add in new components (e.g., leadership development, capacity building, parent engagement, job training), or decide to engage in policy advocacy. This means more people and more types of people will become involved in your efforts: new partners, new grantees, additional funders, policymakers, technical assistance providers, community leaders, volunteers, etc. Additionally, you will experience typical staff and board turnover, so new leaders will replace old leaders among your existing organizational partners. Growth is great. The challenge is that all of



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these people are new to your initiative, yet expected to successfully implement it, fund it, and be its ambassadors in the community. One solution is to anticipate this complexity and develop a plan to onboard new staff and volunteer leaders. This can be done in a variety of ways: Conduct a bi-monthly orientation; produce and share a short video explaining the history, development, and accomplishments to-date; distribute a packet of materials that provide FAQs and important resources (e.g., passwords to members only website content, logos, contact information, meeting dates); regular trainings on key messages and media strategies, and annual “all-hands” meetings. Having your communications plan in place will certainly help, as those new to the initiative will immediately start receiving and engaging in your communications efforts (e.g., monthly newsletters).

None of these three pitfalls require rocket science. They aren’t rooted in metrics or measures, and they don’t have to demand a large investment of resources (although some investment is a smart idea). They are, however, common-sense rules that I make sure my clients embrace when preparing funding initiatives. I encourage you to embrace them, too!

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