



The Putnam Guide

Delusional Altruism: Avoiding Self-Deception and Disrespect

by Kris Putnam-Walkerly, MSW

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I imagine this: You're out at a fancy dinner. It's your treat, because you've just received a surprise inheritance from a wealthy uncle. You're dressed to the nines and looking absolutely fabulous. You're witty and clever in your conversation, and you've made everyone in your party smile at least once. Simply put, you're at the top of your game and feeling great.

Then, you excuse yourself to visit the facilities. You look in the mirror and there it is . . . that big piece of spinach on your tooth that makes you look like the loser in a boxing match. Turns out you weren't so spectacular after all. You realize as your face turns beet red that everyone else at the table must have seen it, but they were too uncomfortable to say anything to you. Your lack of awareness has undermined what was supposed to be a perfect evening. You were deluding yourself.

Fortunately, in this story it's only a piece of spinach. You can wipe it off your teeth, rejoin your guests, and, with a little self-deprecating humor, get the evening back on track.

Unfortunately, in philanthropy this kind of delusion happens all the time. Foundations that think they're doing things right are in fact unintentionally causing unpleasant consequences for themselves and those they serve — and sometimes even causing more harm than good.

I call this “delusional altruism,” and although it's rampant in the philanthropic sector, I'm happy to say that it can be corrected if a funder is simply willing to take an honest look in the mirror. In fact, I've even created a [Delusional Altruism Diagnostic tool](#) (DAD) to help, which is available on my website <http://putnam-consulting.com>. But first, let's take a look at what “delusional altruism” really means.



What Is Delusional Altruism?

Delusional altruism is rearing its head when we are genuinely trying to make a difference on the issues and communities we care about — while paying absolutely no attention to how we get in our own way, nor to the operational inefficiency and waste that drains our foundations and our grantees of the human and financial capital necessary to accomplish our goals.

For example, back in the early 1990s, I worked in a nonprofit organization where we proved our dedication to the cause by denying our need for a fax machine. We spent hundreds of hours each year walking a mile round trip to send faxes — hours that could have been better spent calling donors, writing appeals, drafting letters to Congress, or pursuing any other number of more productive activities.

Funders are just as guilty of delusional altruism as the nonprofits they fund. Funders often genuinely believe that they are doing the right thing by holding back on investment in themselves. Those withheld investments usually aren't investments of cash but investments of belief, courtesy, permission, clarity, or practices that enable greater productivity and impact. How many professional development opportunities are deemed too time-consuming? How many strategic planning processes take longer than the time to implement the plans themselves? How many hours do program officers spend behind their desks doing administrative tasks instead of interacting with the community? How much thicker can a board book be? How many great opportunities are missed because a foundation's grant cycle is completely rigid? How many funding strategies are overly complex?

Furthermore, funders are even more delusional when they create hurdles not just for themselves but for their grantees. One of the most heinous forms of delusional altruism arises when funders simply don't pay attention to what they're doing and the impact that their policies and practices can have on those they most want to help. How many online grant application processes end up being more cumbersome than helpful? How many RFPs take longer to create than the time grantees are given to respond? How many people — both in our foundations and among our grantees — do we

expect should do more with less, when indeed they will never hit the mark unless given the chance to do more with more?

Delusional altruism is rarely intentional, but it is pervasive. And that can have detrimental effects on individual funders and the organizations they support. When we delude ourselves about internal bureaucracy, sloth, or slowness — or when we approach our work with a mentality of poverty and scarcity — we end up inhibiting our ability to be as effective and impactful as we can be in terms of our operation. Instead, why not consider what we need to optimize our operations, and therefore optimize our effectiveness?

10 Manifestations of Delusional Altruism

The manifestations of delusional altruism can be difficult to recognize. Let's look at ten common examples.

1. Adopting a poverty mentality instead of an abundance mentality

The juxtaposition of poverty and abundance has nothing to do with money and everything to do with mindset and attitude. A poverty mentality is really a misguided belief that, as funders, maintaining a Spartan operation equates to delivering more value on the issues and communities that we care about. It's a belief that by not investing in our own capacity, and not investing in the capacity of our grantees, that we're thereby allocating more money in service of the causes we wish to support.

An abundance mentality, on the other hand, is a belief that the more internal investment we make in capacity for our own operations, or the operations of our grantees, the more impact we'll have and the greater the outcomes we'll see.

Here's an example of a poverty mentality: I was working with a health foundation that had a \$40 million annual grantmaking budget. The CEO decided that foundation staff could not take foundation laptops with them on business trips because they might break or be stolen, and they cost \$1,500 to replace. As a result, when her staff traveled to conferences or meetings, they were unable to get work done at the airport or hotel and were virtually unable to communicate with grantees or colleagues.



They would return to the office facing hundreds of unread emails and feeling horribly behind. Grantees and partners would have to wait days or weeks for a response. By focusing only on the unlikely (and from a financial standpoint, irrelevant) possibility of losing \$1,500 to replace a laptop, the foundation policy was greatly hampering staff productivity and responsiveness.

The Heising-Simons Foundation in Silicon Valley, by contrast, is one that embraces an abundance mentality. This relatively new foundation is rapidly growing in terms of assets and staffing. Early on, I worked with them to do some communications planning. Rather than focusing on the short term, they were anticipating the communications capacity they were going to need to have in-house three years down the road, so they invested in communications and scenario planning to determine the kind of staffing they wanted to build. In addition, they hired that staffing structure even before they fully needed it, because they wanted time to prepare themselves.

2. Expecting others to do what you won't

Foundations are often guilty of looking to grantees to implement big ideas that they refuse to implement within their own walls. Examples such as collaboration, innovation, and equity come readily to mind. Funders encourage grantees to collaborate on solutions, but most foundations are known for sticking to their own agendas. Funders want grantees to pursue “innovative” solutions but do nothing to innovate within their own walls and often haven't even defined what they mean by the term. And of course, while funders are concerned more and more about equity within the nonprofit organizations and programs they support, few have assessed their own operations and culture with an eye toward equity.

We rarely think about the capacity required to become collaborative, innovative, or equitable — and thus we become delusional about our potential impact. There is a huge difference between talking about or encouraging an idea and actually engaging in the work of developing it.

Happily, there are some examples of foundations that do “walk the talk” when it comes to embracing the same expectations of themselves that they have of grantees.

I've had the honor of working with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a recognized leader in racial equity in philanthropy. This funder has created its own three-year plan for educating all staff about equity within and outside their organization, and it has included equity elements in all operational work plans and staff performance reviews. (You can find documentation of Casey's work on their website at aecf.org.)

One of the best foundation collaborations I've ever witnessed was one that my firm [documented](#) for the Stuart Foundation. Stuart worked closely, yet informally, with five other funders in the Bay Area to support policy change for public school funding in California. They expected multiple grantees to collaborate in this effort, and they set the tone by themselves collaborating in terms of the strategy, planning, and funding support they provided.

While there are many foundations that fund “[innovation](#),” few embrace it internally. But it's important to realize that innovation doesn't have to be something huge, as is often perceived. Simple changes in process can be innovative and yield positive benefits. In this way, Project Streamline, an initiative of the Grants Managers Network, has helped many foundations apply an innovative lens to their grantmaking policies and procedures.

3. Making self-serving decisions

Throughout the foundation field, we've created a culture of making decisions that are deeply rooted in our internal perspective. As a result, we create policies and practices that benefit the foundation but not the grantees and the communities that we're serving.

For example, I worked once with a senior foundation leader who chose to spend most of his time in the office. He expected that potential grantees and partners would come to him, despite the fact that his offices were somewhat removed from the communities he served and not easy to get to.

California Healthcare Foundation is an example of a foundation that is making decisions with its grantees at the forefront. They conducted a survey of their grantees and grant-seekers to assess how they thought of the foundation and what their experiences had been. Because the foundation had such a professional communications staff and a



comprehensive plan, they were surprised to learn that they received low rankings on communication. I worked with them to determine where the disconnect was occurring and [how to make improvements](#). This foundation dedicated time and resources to listen to its grantees and fix the problems. It was focused on what grantees needed as opposed to what foundation staff thought should be needed or was easiest to provide.

4. Forgetting to intentionally learn

Learning is one of those topics that come up a lot in philanthropy. Foundations will speak of “having a [culture of learning](#)” or appoint a chief learning officer. But in many cases, learning is accidental or after the fact. Most foundations and nonprofits don’t intentionally learn. By “intentionally,” I mean learning in a planned, deliberate, and systematic way. Foundations that embrace intentional learning anticipate when and where learning might occur, ensure that those involved have the time and tools needed to learn, and capture and share their learnings throughout their staffs and with others outside the foundation. What’s learned is then discussed at staff and board meetings, and possibly in other venues. This type of learning is a regular, embedded practice in just about everything the foundation does.

How does intentional learning help stave off delusional altruism? It removes the danger that comes with making assumptions about effectiveness, what works and what doesn’t, and who the most productive partners might be. Without some form of intentional, ongoing learning, it’s almost impossible to factually answer the question: Did our investment work?

Intentional learning also leads to intentional action. Based on what a foundation learns, it can make informed course corrections or tweaks, double down on promising investments, and even withdraw from those that are not working. In every case, it can take learning-informed action to make change.

The Saint Luke’s Foundation in Cleveland used intentional learning to update their board and inform strategic planning. The staff asked themselves more than a dozen [learning questions](#), summarized their key insights, discussed them within their team, and shared them with their board,

all within a few months’ time. The board was thrilled — they received timely information they needed to make decisions about strategy and direction.

Another great example of a foundation that engages in intentional learning is the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust in North Carolina. Their program team meets regularly to discuss potential grants. At each meeting, they ask themselves, “What has to happen for this grant to be successful?” and they document their answers within the grant file. At subsequent meetings, they review the notes, make sure the actions needed for success are indeed happening, and, if not, brainstorm ways they can help. This kind of intentional learning takes very little in time or materials — just discipline.

5. Ignoring customer service

I believe the words “customer service” are rarely uttered by most philanthropists, foundation staff, or foundation trustees. Thinking about customer service isn’t part of the culture of most foundations, but I believe it has true, lasting implications. And I don’t mean treating grantees like paying customers in a business but rather as people without whom our work as foundations would fall flat.

My very first consulting engagement was with a health foundation in California that wanted to fund across the state, but when they looked at their grants, they found a few counties from which there was a dearth of proposals. In the course of speaking with grantees and potential grantees, we learned that they were fed up with the interactions they’d had with foundation staff. They cited countless instances of receiving no response to inquiries or submitted proposals, or of working for months on a proposal only to find that the foundation had changed its funding priorities with little or no notice. In light of this treatment, many nonprofits simply gave up and refused to apply for any more funding.

By contrast, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation provided excellent “customer service” during a [seven-year funding initiative](#). It made it clear from day one that its support would be time-limited, and it also provided extra capacity-building support so that grantees could secure funding and build networks necessary to sustain the work after the foundation had withdrawn. The foundation was willing to make that investment not only because it felt it was appropriate



to support grantee partners but also because it recognized that the long-term value of its investment would be determined by the partners' ability to sustain the work.

Even for smaller-scale grantmaking, funders should never underestimate the value of a friendly voice at their end of the phone line, one that can provide clear and kind advice or gently explain why a proposal is not likely to be funded. Some foundations have gifted staff members who are assigned specifically to this task. When this is the case, grantseekers are less likely to be surprised or disappointed — even if the ultimate answer to a request is “no.”

6. Giving in to bureaucracy and sloth

Bureaucracy can creep up on you like black mold. It's not something anyone sets out to create (“Hmm, how can I make life more complicated today?”), yet it's everywhere. It often masquerades as productivity, which in turn feeds the delusional-altruism fire.

One very large foundation I've worked with had a draft RFP that had been written for funding major grants. The draft had been written, edited, and was ready to go — yet the foundation's review policy allocated one week each to five different departments in the foundation to approve the draft. That's a five-week delay in getting an RFP out to grantees. Yet once the RFP was released, grantees only had three weeks to decide both whether they wanted to apply and whether they wanted to (and could) partner with other RFP recipients in their cities. If they did want to follow through, they had to secure matching funds and complete the application within that same three-week window. These were large grants — up to \$1 million — so you can imagine the stress grant applicants faced.

To its credit, the foundation did not intentionally make this a stressful process. They simply weren't thinking about it, because it was a bureaucratic practice that had emerged years before and was never questioned as the foundation moved forward.

Another foundation took a different approach. The Blue Shield of California Foundation used to send their board members board dockets that were 3 inches tall. Who had time to read all that information, much less make sense of it? Realizing

how bureaucratic and overloaded their process had become, the foundation staff took a systematic approach, looking not just at the board docket but at their entire grantmaking process — from the time an initial letter of intent came in the door to the time a grant check went out. In doing so, they learned that the average grant required hundreds of individual “touches” by foundation staff or board members from start to finish. Hundreds! They have now greatly streamlined their entire grantmaking process, including reducing the board docket to 30 pages.

If you're just starting out as a grantmaker, you have the opportunity to avoid bureaucracy from the get-go, assuming you can avoid a few major pitfalls. One of these is simply adopting practices from other funders without thinking through whether these practices are actually a best fit for your new venture's mission, goals, and culture. Another is not paying attention to how many little decisions can add up to one big mess.

In one case, I worked with a start-up foundation that was led by a CEO who came from a much larger foundation. Because the larger foundation was the only one she'd known, she brought some of those large-staff practices with her, such as expecting her two-person staff and board to conduct in-person site visits to every grant applicant, every quarter. (Talk about delusional!) When she presented this practice to her board and tiny staff, they were overwhelmed. Fortunately, I was able to explain that not every foundation has to conduct site visits, and that she should instead choose a strategy that was more in keeping with the foundation's purpose and capacity.

Regardless of whether a foundation is brand-new or celebrating a century of work, it should always try to simplify the complex and regularly question the status quo in terms of bureaucracy.

7. Lacking urgency and speed

Foundations have virtually no incentive to move quickly. There are few regulations, no shareholders, and few vocal grantees to roust funders into fast action. In some cases, a deliberate approach is warranted, but often speed could make a huge difference in terms of impact.

For example, foundations delude themselves into thinking that the longer a strategic planning



exercise takes, the more relevant the plan will be and the greater impact it will deliver. I believe the reverse is true. In this day and age, it's almost impossible to plan for anything more than a year or two in advance. Spend half or all of that time creating a strategic plan, and you're already behind the times. In reality, I believe strategic planning should be an annual process that is completed within a week. Then foundations can get on with the work of helping communities.

In my opinion, one of the most delusional foundation practices in terms of speed occurs when a foundation ceases grantmaking for a year or even longer in order to “take stock” of its investments, learn more deeply about needs, and create a plan for the next decade (or some other far-reaching period). If a foundation has engaged in ongoing, intentional learning (see point 4 above), then there should be no need to halt all progress in order to reassess footing and vision. Take a weeklong staff and board retreat to delve into what you've learned and where you want to go, then get back to work.

Another example occurs in grantmaking. How long can and should it take for a funder to make a grant? Of course, it varies from funder to funder and is influenced by the size of the grant in question. But recently I was talking to a CEO who was new to a foundation that took nine months to make a grant. She was shocked to learn about this time frame, given all of the smart and talented people on the staff. In this case, the culprit was bureaucracy. Over time, new steps and procedures had crept in, adding up to greater complexity and a longer grantmaking process. No one had questioned it. Fortunately, once the new CEO raised questions, they were able to rapidly reduce that to a much shorter period of time.

8. Jumping on bandwagons

We live in a world of trends. Each year, there seems to be another wonderful new thing that everyone in philanthropy must adopt. Often, these trends are relegated to buzzwords that everyone uses but no one really understands (like “empower,” “collective impact,” “ideation,” “intersectionality”). Sometimes they are actions du jour that make a big splash (like the Ice Bucket Challenge or crowd-funding) but don't deliver impact that's commensurate with the hype.

It's not that any of the practices listed above aren't important or interesting, or even promising. But funders delude themselves when they jump on these bandwagons without thinking about how the next big craze aligns with their own strategy. First it's important to understand how the trend will advance a foundation's work — not just in the moment but in the coming months and years. Foundations should also question whether a new trend is in keeping with their culture and practice. For example, just because a social media fund-raising campaign worked wonderfully for a national nonprofit, that doesn't mean it's a plug-and-play tool for a local funder. The key is to know thyself — then trends are easier to identify as promising practices or passing fads.

Collective impact, which is basically a structured way of collaborating and is a great tool and approach, has been one of the leading bandwagons of the past decade in philanthropy. And while many foundations have embraced it successfully, some have completely missed the mark. Why? Because they're chasing the wagon when perhaps they should simply wave and cheer as it passes on by.

For example, I spoke with one foundation CEO who was specifically looking for an issue to address using collective impact. Never mind that the issue might not have anything to do with their strategy, nor further their mission. Everyone else was “doing collective impact” so this CEO felt that she had to do it as well. Another CEO wanted to create a new initiative simply to employ crowd-funding. This logic is completely backwards. A foundation should work on an issue because it's what's needed in the community, it's in keeping with the mission, and there is role that the foundation can effectively play. Only then should the foundation figure out the most effective way to fulfill that role. Maybe that means funding a collective impact approach, or maybe it would be faster and more efficient to fund three existing grantees who are already making great progress.

One way to avoid the bandwagon mentality is to employ a strategy screen (developed by my colleagues at LaPiana Consulting). I'm a founding member and former chair of a national organization that's relatively small in terms of size, budget, and staffing. As a small organization, it was easy for us to get pulled off track. People would approach us



about doing something, and we'd eagerly "seize the opportunity" without thinking through whether or how it would advance our strategic goals. We got a lot done, and it was all good, but it wasn't necessarily leading us where we wanted to go. Last year, we redid our strategic plan to position our organization for strategic growth. Now we use a strategy screen to filter all the new ideas that come to us. We ask ourselves, "Is this interesting idea going to advance our strategy?" If the answer is "yes," we might proceed if our capacity allows. If "no," we respond with a polite "no, thank you" and move on.

9. Rarely engaging diverse perspectives, or not engaging them at all

One of the most common ways grantmakers fall prey to delusional altruism is by leaving the people who are affected by a foundation's actions out of the decision-making process. This is more than simply adding a member of color to an all-white foundation board or advisory committee, or attending a community meeting in a specific neighborhood, or signing onto a statement in support of LGBT rights. Increasing connections in these ways is perhaps a start, but making sure voices are continually heard and included is the more critical component for informing a foundation's work.

There are many ways to engage diverse perspectives. Begin by creating an advisory committee of community members. Conduct focus groups and surveys of grantees and community members. These can be episodic, as needed, for different projects or initiatives. For example, a foundation launching a new pre-K initiative might make a point of talking to parents of preschoolers about what they need and what's stopping them from accessing high-quality pre-K.

Foundations can also take a more structured, ongoing approach to ensure a constant loop of information and feedback. One foundation I interviewed gathers a group of grantees whenever they do planning, gathers their thoughts and feedback, and then incorporates what they hear into their final plans. Another, the Stuart Foundation in San Francisco, made a point of gathering the perspectives of high school-aged foster care youth and college students who had been in foster care before deciding whether to continue a program for youth transitioning out of

the foster care system.

But engaging diverse perspectives goes even deeper.

In doing [research on equity in philanthropy](#) for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, my firm learned that foundations often delude themselves by genuinely wanting to focus on equity but not turning that equity lens on their own operations. They ask the organizations they fund to prove they have a diverse staff and board, while their own are not. They claim to want to support grassroots organizations, but they make their grant application processes so cumbersome that only a large and sophisticated organization can navigate it. They want to fund economic justice but have never considered whom they hire for their own vendor contracts. The lesson from our research was clear: Engaging diverse perspective starts from within.

10. Creating a culture of disrespect

Sometimes the organizational cultures of foundations fuel disrespect. In fact, many of the practices discussed above contribute to that culture of disrespect: not returning phone calls or replying to emails, expecting grantees to assume the burden of traveling to meetings, subjecting nonprofits to overly cumbersome grantmaking processes, moving too slowly, overlooking the values and opinions of those a foundation purports to serve.

At other times, the examples are more extreme. One foundation program officer I know reported that the entire staff at his foundation intentionally double-book themselves for meetings and phone calls. While that may ensure that each staff member always has something important to do, it also guarantees that someone else is constantly being treated with disrespect. At another foundation, staff wished to move their grant application process online to make it easier and more accessible for grantees. One deeply involved board member dug in his heels against the idea because, as he explained it, "Nonprofits should have to work hard for their money." As if every nonprofit isn't working incredibly hard already.

Fortunately, these last two examples are rare exceptions. I do believe that most foundation staff and board members don't intentionally set out to be disrespectful. It's what happens unintentionally



that we have to watch.

One shining example of respecting grantees comes from the Richard Fairbanks Foundation, a family foundation in Indiana. This organization has a stated value to “respect the perspectives and experiences of all with whom we interact.” They intentionally put their relationships with grantees first and respect them as valuable partners and allies. When new staff are hired, fostering that respect is part of the orientation process. They regularly make decisions by asking themselves, “Are we doing this because it’s going to help us as a foundation or because it’s going to help our grantees?” If it’s not going to help their grantees, they won’t do it. To their credit, the foundation has created strong and respectful relationships with their grantees.

Cultures of respect also grow when foundations are willing to communicate openly and honestly with grantees. One funder shared a story with me recently about a mental health grantee who asked whether the foundation would be supportive of a new literacy program. The funder asked openly and respectfully why the grantee would want to move so far away from its stated mission. They in turn responded honestly that it was what they thought funders wanted to support. Through that conversation, both foundation and grantee gained a deeper respect for and understanding of one another, and now they are better positioned to move forward as allies for the nonprofit’s true mission.

Overcoming Delusion: Ten Things You Can Do Right Now

Because delusional altruism is difficult to spot for those working within a foundation or other organization, I’ve created the online Delusional Altruism Diagnostic that allows users to rate their foundation’s performance on each of the ten manifestations discussed above.

You can take the Delusional Altruism Diagnostic at <http://putnam-consulting.com/dad>, then follow the ten steps below to minimize delusional altruism at your foundation.

1. Take the Delusional Altruism Diagnostic with your colleagues and discuss your answers.

Different members of your board and staff will have different answers to each question, informed

by their unique perspectives and roles at your foundation. Examine what might make the answers different, and discover where you’re most in alignment. Then decide on a list of changes you can agree upon and prioritize together.

2. Pick one area where you want to make dramatic improvements.

Choose one issue from the diagnostic and commit to changing it. This may be an area where your score is woefully low. Or it may be one in which you’re not far from perfect and you’d like to fill the gap. Or it could be an area in which you see an opportunity to make quick progress by addressing relatively easy opportunities. The important thing here is to tackle only one area at a time. Too many, and you’ll be overwhelmed. But as you make progress on the area you’ve chosen, you’ll notice benefits in other areas of the Delusional Altruism Diagnostic as well.

3. Be rapid and dramatic.

Think in terms of speed and dramatic impact. For example, if you want to do a strategic planning process, what would it take to get it done in half the normal time? If you were going to be a national model for foundation customer service, what would that look like? What kind of change could you make immediately? Allow yourself an opportunity to make dramatic change quickly.

Once you have an idea of what you can accomplish quickly, list three concrete actions steps that will get you there. If there are other people you need to involve — such as a colleague, board member, grantee, or community member — write their names down. If there are any internal deadlines that could motivate your work, such as an upcoming board meeting, document that as well.

4. Declare the next month “The Month of _____.”

Fill in the blank with the one area you defined above (step 2). Discuss how to improve this area at all staff meetings. Ask each staff member to identify ways to make improvements. Once the month is over, summarize all you’ve accomplished and celebrate!

5. Survey or ask grantees for their thoughts.

Few people can recognize delusional altruism better than the nonprofits that are on the receiving end. Ask your grantees for candid feedback. Is your



application process fair? Do you communicate and interact with them in helpful ways? More specifically, ask them to list three things that your team could do better that would in turn help them become more productive and effective. Once you've considered grantee feedback, let them know how you plan to address problem areas they've identified.

6. Audit your practices.

It's not that difficult to change complex practices. In fact, I offer a service called "Six-Hour Streamline" in which I review all of the standard practices at work in your foundation and offer ways to optimize your performance, efficiency, and effectiveness almost instantly. The key is to be willing to look at your operation objectively and notice how what happens in one role within your foundation may result in delusional altruism in another. (For example, if your application process is fairly straightforward, but your accounting policies means that it takes three months to cut a check, you're suffering from delusional altruism.)

7. Ask your colleagues for advice.

Other grantmakers have suffered from delusional altruism and have been able to turn their practices around. You can learn from their successes. You also can learn from approaches they tried that didn't work so well. Post questions on listservs, chat up fellow conference attendees, or simply email your network.

8. Consider an objective opinion.

Sometimes it's helpful to hire an outside consultant to support tasks associated with your desire to improve. An objective mind may be able to ask questions that internal staff or board don't think of or are reluctant to ask. They can also help secure honest feedback from external stakeholders. And they can help you identify best practices for optimizing your processes and procedures in ways that will advance your vision, goals, and culture.

9. Pilot, test, learn, and keep going.

Don't hesitate to design new approaches, test them out, and fail fast. Anything that doesn't work will

inform your next approach. Things that do work will optimize your effectiveness. It's a win-win when it comes to combatting delusional altruism. And the more you pilot, test, and learn, the easier it is to keep going.

10. Continue the conversation.

Freeing a foundation from delusional altruism isn't a one-time exercise. It requires ongoing vigilance and attention, because it's easy to fall back into old habits or allow new ones to grow while we are busily attending to our day-to-day work.

Find ways to keep the conversation fresh and present. Assemble a Delusional Altruism Task Force among your staff to maintain watch. Have different departments or units within your foundation provide friendly critiques of potential delusional behavior in other departments. Allow staff to choose "delusion buddies" to check their own thinking at regular intervals. Create channels for grantees and partners to provide anonymous input on your actions and culture as a grantmaker. The possibilities are endless, as long as you have the discipline to keep the conversation going.

No one intends to create bureaucracy, cause delays, or be disrespectful. But to have great impact and transform issues, communities, and neighborhoods, we need to look closely at the mirror and transform ourselves, too. To behave in any other way would be . . . delusional.

Of course, steps like these are easy to suggest but sometimes harder to address, especially if you are bogged down by bureaucracy or overloaded with demands. A [trusted advisor](#) can help you identify your delusions, create a game plan, transform your operations and increase your impact. If you want to accomplish this – or accomplish it more rapidly – You can also learn more at <http://putnam-consulting.com>

Putnam Consulting Group is an award-winning global philanthropy consultancy. Since 1999, we've advised foundations, corporations and philanthropists to strategically allocate more than \$350 million in grants and gifts to increase impact, share success, and advance mission. We help philanthropists and foundations confidently transform their giving to achieve dramatic impact and faster results.



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- LaTida Smith, President, Moses Taylor Foundation

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- Author of *Confident Giving: Sage Advice for Funders*, named a Top 10 Corporate Social Responsibility Book in 2016
- Quoted in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, BusinessWeek and other media outlets
- Chair of the National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers
- Co-editor of the first edition of *The Foundation Review* dedicated to the field of philanthropic consulting
- Author of the highly acclaimed *Philanthropy 411* blog, *Smart Philanthropy*SM podcasts, and *Confident Giving*[®] newsletter
- More than 20,000 followers on social media
- Former trustee of the Community Foundation of Lorain County and Horizons Foundation
- Inducted into The Million Dollar Consultant[®] Hall of Fame

OUR SERVICES

PHILANTHROPIC ADVISING

In her role as a trusted advisor to high-wealth donors and foundation leaders, Kris Putnam-Walkerly:

- Provides clarity to accelerate decision-making
- Offers a confidential sounding board for all aspects of philanthropic strategy and operations
- Creates capacity in foundations to allow for increased innovation
- Helps funders transform their giving for greater impact
- Navigates the development and launch of new foundations
- Helps new foundation leaders start strong and stay strong
- Provides ideas, examples, and practical tools for immediate use
- Offers unlimited access to respond to your immediate needs

SPEAKING

- Deliver keynotes and workshops at global, national and local events
- Tailor speaking engagements to meet your goals
- Offer provocative thinking with actionable ideas and tools
- Create teleconference, podcast or video series
- Provide customized research or article to inform or reinforce topic
- Immediately put new skills and ideas into action with tailored, post-speaking sessions or coaching

STRATEGIC CONSULTING

- Facilitate strategy development and implementation
- Design grantmaking programs and new funding initiatives
- Pinpoint funding gaps
- Identify funding partners and intermediary organizations
- Assess evaluation needs
- Translate evaluation results into clear recommendations

COMMUNICATING RESULTS

- Create strategic communication plans
- Craft compelling case studies
- Build toolkits to support your issue
- Share lessons learned
- Disseminate your story via our broad network of press and social media