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THINGS I ALWAYS TELL A NEW GRANTMAKER

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As a regional association staff person, I am often one of the first to welcome new grantmakers to the funding community.

Foundations in our region tend to hire individuals with no experience in philanthropy in favor of hiring individuals with a skill set or expertise that aligns with the organization's strategies or focus areas.

Trustees engaged in grantmaking find themselves equally challenged to understand how to be an effective funder. They may be a family member or a community leader, but have probably never been a grantmaker.

So how does someone new to the field learn how to do the work?



Not every grantmaking organization has a knowledge officer or even a curriculum for learning. There may not be a seasoned funder on staff in a small organization or the organization's staff may be stretched too thin or separated by focus area.

After meeting with lots of beginning funders, I decided to create a tip sheet of ideas for how to start and sustain a personal learning plan:

1 Become Active in a Regional Association or a Local Funder's Network

I know I'm biased about the importance of networks, but

I learned long ago that no one grows up to be a grantmaker

– everyone has been on the same steep learning curve at one point in their career. This shared experience makes every grantmaker a contributing member of a robust learning community and this field is all about learning.

Find out if there is a regional association of grantmakers in your area by visiting the [Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers website](#). Your friends at [LearnPhilanthropy](#) have made it easy for you to find both regional associations and affinity groups – funders who come

together around an issue or identity. It might take a little sleuthing to find a local funder's network, but it is well worth your time! Ask your colleagues whom they've worked with in the past.

2 Attend a Workshop on Grantmaking Basics

Regional associations, the [Council on Foundations](#), and other philanthropic organizations offer a grantmaking basics workshop that grounds you in the work, connects you to resources and introduces you to other funders who are also learning the craft of grantmaking. Most workshops are facilitated by practitioners – individuals with a depth of on-the-job experience in the field. And you'll meet other new folks – a grantmaking basics workshop is a great place to start building a personal network of colleagues. You can turn to this peer network for help, advice, and perhaps even solace throughout your learning journey.

3 Find a Mentor

Once you are part of a learning community, don't hesitate to find a mentor. Funders tend to be a generous group. They remember what it was like to be new and how important it is to welcome beginning funders and provide support and guidance. They can tell you how to set up a site visit, what to say to an applicant who doesn't get funded, how to define "collective impact"

Every field has its own jargon and quirky classifications, and new grantmakers are usually bewildered for a while by the language of our field, by the subtle but important differences in institutional types, and other things. Many of the terms and distinctions we use are often non-intuitive and so complicated that even seasoned practitioners don't quite get them.

Get a head start on learning the **jargon** by checking out communications consultant **Tony Proscio**. With support from The **Edna McConnell Clark Foundation**, he has published three great books on that subject and they are both amusing and well worth your time. LearnPhilanthropy offers a section devoted to the "**Philanthropy Ecosystem**" including a helpful glossary and an explanation of some key distinctions in this confusing field.

and best of all, they can be especially helpful in translating the jargon of philanthropy.

4 **Seek Out Ongoing Educational Opportunities**

Curiosity is key in this field. Find educational opportunities to deepen your knowledge on issues and best practices in philanthropy. There is no shortage of information in this field, and each year dozens of new resources are produced that can expand your skill-set and build your expertise. Luckily, you now have a place that makes the best resources in the field easily accessible! Start your exploration with **LearnPhilanthropy** – the first comprehensive marketplace for all things related to grantmaker education. Content providers include affinity groups, regional associations, philanthropic organizations, academic institutions and related research and grantmaker support organizations. You can find resources, links to conferences and workshops, websites – and even people! It won't take you long to come up with your own short list of places you go for information and your favorite thought leaders – those folks in the field who poke and prod us to really think about the work we do. Doing grantmaking well means being an active and committed learner.

5 Take Advantage of Training Opportunities

Take advantage of the many training opportunities provided by affinity groups, regional associations, and other philanthropic organizations. Whether you are an organization focused on a single issue or a general-purpose funder, whether you are looking for a new approach to a complex community problem or just wanting to refresh your skills, there are lots of great funder gatherings being offered each year. And, if possible and within budget, attend an event outside of your hometown or state. You'll find commonalities with funders from other parts of the country and great examples of what does and does not work. In the company of colleagues, funders are willing to share both successes and failures – and to seek advice from peers.

6 Create a System for Keeping Up on Digital Resources

Digital media... there is no shortage of information and opportunities to connect via the web and social media. I am a faithful reader of favorite websites. I subscribe to a variety of newsletters, follow people and organizations on Twitter, and try desperately to keep current. I confess, it is a challenge for me.

“Drinking from a fire hose” comes close to capturing it.

I find I need to be disciplined about how much time I spend each day reading and thinking about what's new in philanthropy. Not quite a Luddite, I do still need to download thought-provoking articles to read at my leisure. That is a personal preference and for me, a survival tool. The web can be overwhelming.

Google “philanthropy” – the last search gave me 24,800,000 results in 0.18 seconds.

Good luck! I think even digital natives struggle with the abundance of information that is out there. This is why sites such as LearnPhilanthropy and [GrantCraft](#) provide a valuable short cut – a curated list of sites, “must reads,” and an archive of the best resources on a variety of topics related to the craft of grantmaking from [LearnPhilanthropy Content Partners](#) like [Alliance Magazine](#) and [The Foundation Review](#).

7 Take Time to Listen to the Nonprofit Community

Don't forget that our nonprofit partners are half of the philanthropic equation. Without a thriving nonprofit community, many of us would be out of jobs. Take some time to listen - listen deeply – to hear how the grantmaking-grantseeking dynamic is working for those who are providing services and advocating for causes in our

communities. More and more I'm seeing philanthropic and nonprofit leaders coming together to search for solutions to thorny problems.

We can, as the saying goes, be better together.

8 Give Yourself Permission to Practice

Finally, try to remember that grantmaking is an art. There are more best practices, experts, resources, and information than you can absorb in a lifetime. You want to base your work on core knowledge, but the best learning comes with practice and time. Stay curious, be patient with yourself, become part of a learning community and welcome change. Most of all, recognize and embrace the diversity of the philanthropic community – there is no one “best” way to give, no “right” answer to complex questions, no “single” pathway to progress, and no “perfect” evaluation process. Whether your organization is giving from the heart or from the head – or, as most do, from both - it is all good work when intended to create communities where every individual has the opportunity to reach their full potential.