

Building Relationships with Funders

An important step to take as you look to secure funding is to build relationships with a diverse set of prospective funders (i.e. foundations, individual donors, corporations, etc.). Getting to know a funder helps you as a prospective recipient of funds to understand their mission, goals and vision for giving. This also allows an opportunity for the prospective funder to get to know you and your organization's work. This is critical to any long-term fundraising strategy.

Building a relationship with a prospective funder relies on the following:

- Mission alignment
- Open and ongoing communication
- Mutual respect and clear expectations
- Trust

Mission Alignment

Identifying a prospective funder that is aligned with your organization's mission will likely lead to more success in actually obtaining funds. Mission alignment ensures the prospective funder cares about the work of your organization, and they see where your organizational work fits into their portfolio of grantees. Researching prospective funders to see if there is alignment or potential shared interests is an important part of building your funding strategy. This research will also help you make sure you do not seek funding from an entity that funds efforts that conflict with your mission. Set up time to have an introductory conversation, seek out individuals at events and conferences, ask other funders to facilitate introductions, and share reports and information about your work as a way to introduce your organization. Your aim is to make your work important to the funder, demonstrate your impact and illustrate that your efforts are not only worth funding but will be something the funder wants to share with their board and other stakeholders.

Open and Ongoing Communication

You've managed to build your list of potential funders, now the work begins to tell them about your work. There are a myriad of ways to elevate your work to a potential funder.

- Consider following them on their various social media platforms.
- Tag them via social media as you engage your key audiences about your work.
- Send them a copy of your quarterly or annual reports.
- Invite them to in-person or virtual events (a smaller event to showcase the work might be ideal) your organization is hosting or for a site visit to see your work and to begin building a personal connection.
- Identify the program officer who funds your area and request a meeting with them to share about your work.

Be transparent about your efforts to seek funding from their organization and ask for their annual giving report so you can gain a better understanding of the types of organizations they have been funding. Communicate your campaign or organization's impact. Be able to quantify how many people are affected by your work. What is the problem you are trying to solve? This will help funders understand why they should fund your work and will help you secure potential longer-term funding. It also provides the opportunity for your work to be attractive to multiple funders, helping to diversify your funding pool.

Mutual Respect and Clear Expectations

Inherently there is a power dynamic between a prospective funder and the organization seeking funding, thus it's important to ensure mutual respect is at the top of the list. Mutual respect means there are clear expectations and a shared understanding as to what the funder wants to see in terms of reporting about the progress of your work. A funder may also request that you attend, present or discuss your work at various events, or that you participate in a grantee peer exchange. Your understanding of these expectations ensures there is mutual respect by illustrating not a solely transactional relationship but one that depends on both granter and grantee to work collaboratively for mutual benefit.

Trust

Lastly, good funding relationships are based on trust. A prospective funder needs to understand that your organization's work is trustworthy and that you are the type of organization that delivers on their commitments. You need to reflect a positive relationship with your existing funders and your constituents. If awarded funding, you should be able to show you are a good steward of the funds received. No funder wants to feel they awarded funds that were used for something outside of the scope of a proposal. Make sure any reports you develop are clear as to how funds have been spent. Respond to requests from the funder in a timely manner. If you have questions or need to shift your plans, talk to the funder beforehand. The relationship you've built will help with these conversations so that you can problem solve and work together to meet both your goals and those of the funder.

The main goal in building relationships with prospective funders is to cultivate and nurture the relationship. The ideal is not a "one and done" ask but to think about including the prospective funder in your portfolio moving them from the short term to a longer term more substantial supporter of the work.