



Inquiry-Driven Grantmaking: A Guide for Communications Staff

Overview

AS COMMUNICATIONS STAFF, you shape how the field understands and approaches complex challenges. Your work goes beyond simply promoting your grantees or foundation; you have the power to shift narratives, surface new frameworks, and build collective knowledge across the sector. An inquiry-driven approach positions you as a field-builder and narrative architect, sharing the questions you're exploring, the insights you're generating, and the evolving understanding that's reshaping how communities and funders approach problems. Your role is to make learning public, invite diverse voices into question formation, and help build new narratives that change how entire fields think and act.

Why It Matters Now

Narratives around philanthropy often position funders as experts, communities as recipients, success as linear, and solutions as replicable. Meanwhile, transformative insights about how questions evolve, what assumptions proved wrong, and which communities hold crucial knowledge remain locked in internal reports - or are not captured at all.

An inquiry-driven approach allows you to:

- Build new field narratives that center questions, learning, and community expertise over predetermined solutions.
- Create collective knowledge infrastructure where insights from foundations' work inform others' strategies.
- Shift power dynamics by amplifying community voices in defining problems and solutions.
- Model transparency and intellectual humility that transforms sector norms.
- Generate thought leadership that

changes how the field approaches entire issue areas.

You're not just communicating about your foundation; you're helping build a learning ecosystem for the entire sector.

Possible Actions You Can Take

Tactical (Start This Quarter)

- **Produce questions-first content:** For your next major publication, lead with the questions driving your work, not the answers you've found. Frame the foundation as one explorer among many.
- **Consider new formats that center curiosity:** For example, you might create a "What we got wrong" series in which staff share assumptions that proved incorrect and explain how their thinking changed as a result. Or you might create a "What surprised us" series in which staff share one finding that challenged their assumptions.
- **Reframe "impact" stories:** In case studies, take a "warts-and-

all" approach, dedicating space to examining what was learned and what changed. Include descriptions of how those findings shifted the foundation's thinking.

- **Share insights in real-time:** Share emerging insights as they develop. Blog about confounding data, tensions between findings, and questions that need broader exploration. Offer periodic reappraisals of those insights as new evidence emerges.
- **Share questions on social media:** Post one compelling question from your grantmaking work to social media each month. Invite responses. Engage with different perspectives.

Strategic (This Year)

- **Build "questions commons":** Create a public repository for foundation professionals to post questions, insights, and calls for collaboration.
- **Document question evolution:** Create public-facing "question genealogies" showing how your strategic questions changed over

time, what evidence caused shifts, and what you learned from abandoned directions.

- **Launch a cross-foundation learning series:** Partner with three to five peer foundations exploring related questions. Co-publish insights that synthesize learning across organizations, demonstrating collective knowledge-building.
- **Reframe thought leadership:** Instead of positioning foundation leaders as experts with answers, create platforms where diverse voices (including grantees, community members, practitioners, and others) wrestle publicly with shared questions.
- **Document productive tensions:** Publish pieces that surface important dilemmas, trade-offs, or competing values that the field needs to navigate.

Cultural (Long-term Investment)

- **Shift from promotion to pedagogy:** Redefine your communications mission from “raising foundation profile” to “advancing field learning.” Measure success by how often others cite, build on, or challenge your insights.
- **Build narrative infrastructure for questions:** Create templates, formats, and platforms designed for sharing evolving understanding rather than finished products. Make works-in-progress visible.

- **Center community voice in narrative:** Systematically shift who tells stories. Support grantees and community members to publish under their own names, sharing their questions and insights without foundation filter.
- **Normalize uncertainty:** Make “we don’t know yet” and “our thinking is evolving” standard elements of foundation communications. Build cultural comfort with public learning.
- **Create accountability for narrative impact:** Track narrative shifts across the field. Are field conversations changing? Are different questions being asked? Are new voices being heard? What accounts for these shifts?

Next Steps

This week: How could you reframe an upcoming communications piece so that it focuses on field learning rather than announcing foundation work? Develop a list of questions that the communications piece could help the sector explore.

This month: Map the dominant narratives in one issue area you work in. What stories get told repeatedly? Whose voices are centered? What questions aren’t being asked? What would it take to develop a counter-narrative?

This quarter: Convene three to give grantees working on related questions. Co-design a publication in which they share their questions, tensions, and emerging insights. Use your foundation’s megaphone

to curate and amplify, while allowing the grantees to lead the narrative.

This year: Develop a comprehensive “learning in public” strategy. What insights from your grantmaking could help to reshape field understanding? What kinds of publishing and communications infrastructure would allow you to share those insights in real-time?

Multi-year: Partner with evaluators and researchers on longitudinal studies tracking narrative change. How are field conversations evolving? What role did shared questions and public learning play? Document and share methodology so that others can learn from and replicate these investigations.

Remember: You’re not abandoning strategic communications; you’re recognizing that your foundation’s greatest contribution may not be the programs you fund but the questions you surface, the insights you share, and the narratives you help transform. Inquiry-driven communications creates public goods that outlive individual grants and give permission for others in the field to engage in similar work. When you publish a question that 20 other foundations start exploring, that’s multiplicative impact. When you shift a dominant narrative from “communities need fixing” to “communities hold crucial knowledge,” you’ve changed the conditions for everyone’s work.