



Inquiry-Driven Grantmaking: A Guide for Grantmaking Program Officers

Overview

AS A PROGRAM OFFICER, you are the bridge between foundation strategy and the field. You meet potential partners, develop grant proposals, maintain relationships with grantees, and gather insights from the ground. An inquiry-driven approach repositions your role from evaluator of grantees to co-investigator and learning partner. Instead of assessing organizations against predetermined criteria, you work collaboratively to identify meaningful questions, design experiments to explore them, and generate insights that reshape both your foundation's strategy and the broader field.

Why It Matters Now

The challenges you're funding—whether in education, health, economic mobility, or climate—are changing faster than traditional grantmaking cycles can accommodate. Communities are seeking more authentic partnership and voice in philanthropic decision-making. Meanwhile, you cannot rely on your expertise alone to respond to the full complexity of rapidly evolving systems.

An inquiry-driven approach allows you to:

- Respond effectively to changing conditions rather than remaining locked into multi-year strategies that may become obsolete.
- Build genuine partnerships where grantees shape questions beyond responding to foundation priorities alone.
- Generate learning that informs not just individual grant renewal decisions but broader strategic pivots.

- Surface insights from proximate leaders that would be impossible to access through traditional due diligence.

The shift toward questions isn't about working harder—it's about working *differently* by focusing your time on relationships and learning instead of transactional processes.

Possible Actions You Can Take

Tactical (Start This Quarter)

- **Reframe your sourcing calls:** Begin meetings by asking potential partners, "What questions guide your work? What keeps you up at night?" before explaining your strategy.
- **Conduct question audits:** Review your last 5 RFPs or email outreach. Circle directive language (e.g., "We fund X") and rewrite as open questions (e.g., "What approaches to X are showing promise?").
- **Start check-ins with grantee questions:** Ask "What are you most

curious about right now?" before asking about grant progress.

- **Model "I don't know":** In meetings with grantees and colleagues, practice saying "I don't know" or "I'm uncertain about..." when true. Notice what new directions it unlocks.
- **Debrief by asking "What surprised you?":** After every sourcing call or check-in, jot down one thing that challenged your assumptions. Share with colleagues monthly.
- **Celebrate failure:** In your next team meeting, share one grant that generated valuable insight despite not working as planned.

Strategic (This Year)

- **Co-design grant hypotheses:** For your next three grants, hold working sessions with prospective grantees in which you collaboratively design an inquiry question and evidence plan for the grant in lieu of a traditional proposal.
- **Build in assumption-testing:** Before

finalizing proposals, explicitly list 3-5 assumptions embedded in the work and what evidence would validate them or prove them wrong.

- **Create learning circles:** Organize three to five grantees working on related questions into a peer learning cohort that meets quarterly to share emerging insights around a shared set of questions.
- **Track question evolution:** For active grants, document how core questions change over six months. What caused shifts? Present findings to your team.
- **Develop a proximate leader advisory group:** Identify five to seven people closest to problems you're funding (i.e., not traditional experts) who can help identify knowledge gaps and suggest who you should be talking to.

Cultural (Long-term Investment)

- **Advocate for different success metrics:** Propose that your team track "quality of questions asked" alongside dollars deployed or programs funded.
- **Shift check-in purpose:** Explicitly tell grantees that renewal isn't contingent on hitting metrics but on quality of learning. Ask: "What surprised you? What would you do differently? What new questions emerged?"
- **Create space for reflection:** Block two hours monthly on your calendar for synthesis in which you read reports, connect insights, and identify patterns. Keep a journal of what you are learning and questions that you still have. Review these reflections every quarter, and adjust practice based on learnings.
- **Encourage peer learning:** Start a monthly lunch with other program officers where each person brings one confounding question from their work for collective problem-solving. Document how actions taken as a result of these discussions differed from traditional practice.

Next Steps

This week: Choose one tactical action and try it in your next grantee interaction. Notice what changes.

This month: Schedule 30 minutes with your supervisor to discuss what inquiry-driven approach might mean for your portfolio. Share one insight from this guide.

This quarter: Identify one upcoming grant where you can pilot co-designed questions and custom metrics (working with MEA staff as appropriate). Document what you learn.

Remember: Organizational culture change takes time. You don't need to transform your entire portfolio overnight. Start with one question, one grant, one relationship. Pay attention to what shifts. Share what you learn. The cumulative effect of many small experiments creates the foundation for larger transformation.

