



Inquiry-Driven Grantmaking: A Guide for Senior Leadership

Overview

AS SENIOR LEADERSHIP - presidents, vice presidents, chief program officers - you set strategic direction, make final funding decisions, represent the foundation externally, and shape organizational culture. An inquiry-driven approach asks you to embrace leading with uncertainty, with questions rather than answers. This means committing resources to exploration without predetermined outcomes, valuing learning as much as impact, and modeling intellectual humility publicly. Your role shifts from chief decision-maker to chief learning officer, creating conditions where staff, grantees, and the broader field can pursue bold questions that reshape how we understand and address complex challenges.

Why It Matters Now

Philanthropy is facing a legitimacy crisis. Communities demand authentic partnership, not paternalistic “solutions.” Climate, inequality, democratic fragility, technological disruption, and other challenges are changing faster than strategic plans can accommodate. Meanwhile, staff and grantees must navigate the gap between philanthropy’s public commitments to trust and learning and internal systems that still reward certainty and control.

An inquiry-driven approach allows you to:

- Maintain strategic coherence while adapting to rapidly changing conditions
- Demonstrate genuine partnership and power-sharing with communities
- Attract and retain exceptional staff who want to learn, evolve, and effect real change
- Generate insights that can fundamentally reshape entire fields

- Model for the sector what responsive, humble, effective philanthropy looks like

Possible Actions You Can Take

Tactical (Start This Quarter)

- **Model “I don’t know”:** In your next three public speaking opportunities or board meetings, explicitly name what you don’t yet know or where you’re uncertain. Notice what new directions this framing unlocks.
- **Lead with questions:** Restructure one board presentation to lead with questions you’re exploring rather than strategies you’re executing. Reframe decisions as hypotheses to test.
- **Celebrate productive failures:** In all-staff meetings, dedicate time to sharing grants that didn’t work as planned but that generated valuable learning.
- **Ask staff about their questions:** In your next round of one-on-ones, ask program officers: “What question about your work keeps you up at night?” Listen for and document patterns.

- **Reframe budget presentations:** Present next year’s budget as investments in exploring specific strategic questions rather than as program allocations.

Strategic (This Year)

- **Commission a question audit:** Have an external facilitator review your strategic plan, RFPs, board materials, and public communications. What percentage is directive vs. interrogative? Where do you assert answers vs. invite inquiry?
- **Reallocate resources toward learning:** Dedicate 10-15% of program budget to learning activities explicitly fund learning activities such as: convenings, documentation, reflection time, and peer exchanges.
- **Build learning infrastructure:** Invest in dedicated knowledge and impact staff, qualitative analysis tools, and time for synthesis. Make learning a core organizational function, not an afterthought.

- **Create board learning sessions:** Engage board members in exploring one strategic question each quarter. Invite diverse voices to challenge assumptions.
- **Launch shared question initiative:** Identify one question relevant across multiple foundations. Invite five to seven peer organizations to co-investigate these questions, sharing insights openly.

Cultural (Long-term Investment)

- **Redefine success:** Shift what you celebrate and reward by including “quality of questions asked” in performance reviews.
 - **Restructure funding around questions:** Consider organizing portfolios around strategic questions rather than issue areas. Allow program officers to fund across traditional silos.
 - **Invest in question literacy:** Bring in question science experts (e.g., from Right Question Institute, GovLab, or Q-Lab) for staff development. Build capacity for rigorous inquiry.
- **Model long-term commitment:** Pick one or two major questions to explore over the next five years. Accept that you won’t have clear answers quickly. Communicate this publicly.

Next Steps

This week: Block two hours for reflection. What questions does your foundation genuinely not know the answer to? If answered, which of those questions would most reshape your work?

This month: Convene the senior leadership team to discuss this question: What would need to change in our organization to make inquiry-driven grantmaking sustainable? Document barriers and enablers.

This quarter: Pilot an inquiry-driven approach in one portfolio or initiative. Give program officers explicit permission to experiment. Protect them from failure stigma.

This year: Commission the development of a “learning agenda” alongside your strategic plan. What do you need to learn to achieve your goals? Who needs to be asking questions alongside you?

Multiyear: Track question evolution by



creating a spreadsheet documenting how each grant’s core question has changed over time and what caused the shift. Commit to tracking how your strategic questions evolve over time. Publish question genealogies showing what you learned, what caused shifts, what you retired and why. Model intellectual humility for the field.

Remember: Your leadership creates permission for others to embrace uncertainty, ask hard questions, and pursue unexpected directions. This culture change takes years, not months. But your visible commitment to questions over answers, learning over certainty, and intellectual humility over expertise is what makes transformation possible.