



SIEGEL FAMILY
ENDOWMENT

Better Questions, Better Insights



How
Philanthropy
Can Harness
the Science
of Questions for
Deeper Impact



Acknowledgement and Research Consultations

➔ Over the course of the decade we've been practicing inquiry-driven grantmaking, we've encountered many people doing similar work. As background research for this paper, we spoke with a number of them — both in 1:1 interviews and group consultation sessions. Many of their insights helped inform this paper, with direct quotes from our interviews included where appropriate.

- Clara Bennet, Omidyar Network
- Warren Berger, journalist and author of *A More Beautiful Question*
- Ron Bogle, Redesign America's Schools
- Megan Campbell, Feedback Labs
- Kevin Connors, Susan Crown Exchange
- Deepti Doshi, New_Public
- Iara Duarte Peng, JustFund
- Alex Fischer, member of Australia's Dusseldorp Forum and one of the early architects behind the Paul Ramsay Foundation's curiosity-driven approach
- Josh Greenberg, Sloan Foundation
- Tom Kalil, Renaissance Philanthropy
- Zia Khan, formerly of The Rockefeller Foundation
- Jessica Johansen, Tepper Foundation
- Priya Mohabir, New York Hall of Science
- Amber Oliver, Robin Hood
- Linda Nguyen, First Workings
- Leah Reisman, The Barra Foundation
- J.B. Schramm, Grove
- Michelle Shevin, Future Preservation Society
- Members of Siegel's Internal Staff
- And others

➔ Huge thanks to Stefaan Verhulst and Hannah Chafetz, whose groundbreaking research and thought partnership has strengthened our conviction, and to Dr. Rachel Burstein, whose research, interview facilitation, and authorship contributed greatly to the articulation of this paper.

Definitions Glossary

Answers	Definitive data that directly resolves a specific question or query, implying a degree of finality or correctness that can be evaluated against a known standard.
Information	Data in any form — text, numerical, visual, or otherwise — gleaned from a verifiable source. Information is raw and context-neutral; it can be transmitted without necessarily being understood.
Insights	Uniquely additive contributions to the world's body of knowledge — interpretations or conclusions that go beyond what is already known or easily derivable. Unlike learnings, which may be new to the knower but not to the field, insights represent a non-obvious understanding that generates genuine epistemic value.
Knowledge	Verifiable data grounded in context and reflecting depth of understanding about a subject. Unlike mere information, knowledge implies internalization, synthesis, and the ability to apply what is known meaningfully within a given domain.
Learnings	Discrete units of knowledge acquired through experience, observation, or inquiry — particularly those that revise or refine prior understanding. Learnings are iterative and often emergent, arising from processes (such as research, experimentation, or engagement with AI systems) rather than from static sources.
Responses	The output generated by querying or prompting an AI system — distinct from answers in that responses are not presumed to be correct or complete, but rather represent the system's generated reaction to an input.

Table of Contents

Introduction Page 4

CHAPTER 1
The Science of Questions Page 6

CHAPTER 2
The Case for Questions in Philanthropy Page 12

CHAPTER 3
Inquiry-Driven Grantmaking: A Questions Approach for Philanthropy Page 20

CHAPTER 4
Building a Movement Around Questions Page 30

Introductory Letter

Dear Colleagues,

We find ourselves in an era of unprecedented information abundance. Artificial intelligence can generate responses to almost any question in seconds. Large language models produce sophisticated analyses, students can solve complex problems with a few keystrokes, and the internet offers instant access to more data than any human could process in a lifetime. Yet this proliferation of material has created a paradox: as a society, **we're drowning in information while starving for insight.** And while we continue to dedicate capacity to generating information, we've dedicated less capacity to asking questions worthy of pursuit.

This reality demands a shift in how we think, learn, and work. A response is emerging in the form of the "science of questions," a rigorous, systematic approach to formulating, testing, and refining the inquiries that shape our understanding of the world. Just as the scientific method transformed *how* humanity generated knowledge, a science of questions can transform how we identify *which* knowledge is needed for which problems. **The way we frame problems – and who participates in that framing – fundamentally shapes the solutions we discover.**

Our own organization was founded by David Siegel, whose background as a PhD computer scientist and advocate of science research has shaped our philosophy. Science teaches us to embrace uncertainty, question assumptions, treat "failures"

Inquiry-Driven Philanthropy

An approach to grantmaking based on an iterative process of asking questions, systematically interrogating them, and applying the findings to subsequent rounds of questioning.

as valuable data points, build on collective knowledge, and understand that breakthrough discoveries can emerge from asking better questions.

As Siegel Family Endowment, we've spent years developing an inquiry-driven approach to grantmaking that treats questions not as preludes to answers but as tools for navigating complexity. It started from a desire to respect the far too often discarded learnings that come from "failed" grants. When we didn't see the outcome we desired, we asked: How can we still positively impact the field by sharing more about the outcomes we *do* see?

We typically don't fund solutions to known problems; we instead support deliberate investigation of the questions that will shed light on problems worth solving.

A focus on asking better questions has led us beyond predetermined or linear solutions towards ones that get at the deeper structures of power in the context of complex systems.

This approach, grounded in the scientific method and adapted for social change, has transformed how

we work with partners and how we understand our role in the philanthropic ecosystem. The cascading effects have pushed our grantmaking beyond solely providing services to pursuing systems change, reframing narratives, and building power alongside communities. Questions have also prompted us to rethink how we measure progress, co-defining unique and innovative ways alongside our partners to truly capture the non-linear nuance of their work.

Consider youth economic opportunity. A linear question asks "How do we increase job placement rates for disconnected youth?" That question leads to training programs, resume workshops, and capture of 90-day retention rates. We can reframe that question: "What systemic barriers prevent young people from accessing economic opportunity, and what would it take to eliminate those barriers?" In response to this question, the work shifts to collaborating with employers to redesign hiring practices, investing in alternative credentialing systems, and fostering peer support networks led by youth themselves. Our metrics shift, too. Instead of counting job placements, we might track how many employers eliminated credential barriers or measure the percentage of program alumni who become peer mentors to younger students.

This whitepaper shares what we've learned about applying the science of questions to philanthropic practice. Chapter one will provide a primer on the emergent "science of questions" as a field, authored by two of the field's leading thinkers. Chapter two will make the case for the application of questions

in philanthropy, detailing the benefits that questions allow us to unlock. Chapter three will detail how inquiry can be incorporated across the grantmaking process, as well as the benefits and tradeoffs of doing so. Chapter four closes with a call to build a movement around questions.

Many foundation leaders and staff already value questions and encourage curiosity, yet often lack explicit frameworks to systematically integrate inquiry throughout grantmaking; there is a gap between intuitive appreciation and rigorous practice. This whitepaper offers tested processes and practical tools to operationalize what you already know: asking questions can help foundations deepen their impact.

As with our inquiry-driven approach itself, this whitepaper does not offer clear-cut answers for driving greater impact. Rather, it invites a conversation about how the philanthropic sector can evolve to meet the moment. We hope that you'll be part of that conversation.



- Katy Knight

We typically don't fund solutions to known problems; we instead support deliberate investigation of the questions that will shed light on problems worth solving.

Chapter One

The Science of Questions

How can we make question formulation rigorous, intentional, and inclusive?

By Stefaan G. Verhulst, The Governance Lab and The Data Tank,
and Hannah Chafetz, The Governance Lab

THE WORLD IS CHANGING rapidly, and the challenges we face as a society are increasingly complex and interconnected. From education, energy, workforce development, digital infrastructure, and community resilience, we see problems that defy simple solutions. Climate change intersects with economic inequality, technological disruption reshapes labor markets and learning environments, and social divisions are amplified by digital platforms.

Amid developments in data science and artificial intelligence, new technologies have expanded society's ability to generate so-called answers more efficiently. Consumer-facing large language models can produce responses to queries in an instant. Precleaning of data is now largely automated. Edge computing enables data to be processed closer to its source, allowing for real-time data analysis.

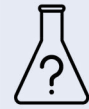
However, alongside the growing capacity for [producing answers](#), societies have devoted comparatively less attention to an equally critical task: the deliberate formulation and framing of

questions. While decision-makers often assume that increasing the [volume of information](#) or [improving model sophistication](#) will help resolve pressing societal issues, persistent challenges remain across domains such as education, public health, and climate action. Philanthropy is no exception.

In many cases, shortcomings stem not from inadequate answers or processing systems, but from [poorly defined or misaligned questions](#).

The way societies discover and formulate questions (including who asks the questions) has significant implications for what is measured, prioritized, and ultimately achieved. Recognizing this, decision-makers across sectors increasingly seek to establish a systematic approach to question design: a [new “science of questions”](#) that treats inquiry itself as a distinct and rigorous domain of practice. Addressing contemporary complexity, including interconnected crises such as climate change and inequality, requires not only more data or improved technologies but more structured, participatory, and contextually grounded inquiry.

Alongside the growing capacity for producing answers, societies have devoted comparatively less attention to an equally critical task: the deliberate formulation and framing of questions.



The Science of Questions

A systematic approach to question design that treats inquiry as a distinct and rigorous domain of practice.

Over the past several years, The GovLab’s [100 Questions Initiative](#) has sought to operationalize this new science by developing a structured methodology for identifying and refining high-priority questions. The initiative engages those with subject matter experts and those with lived experiences to incorporate a diversity of perspectives in the formulation and prioritization of questions. It includes so-called “bilinguals” — individuals with subject matter and data expertise — to co-create questions that are both societally important and actionable. It also involves public voting to prioritize questions.

THE SIX-STEP METHODOLOGY INCLUDES:

1

Topic mapping to identify critical domains

2

The formation of interdisciplinary panels

3

The generation of a wide set of questions

4

Clustering and categorization

5

Prioritization through participatory ranking processes

6

Broader public engagement to validate and refine the final question set

This participatory model challenges traditional expert-driven paradigms and seeks to democratize agenda-setting by incorporating diverse and lived perspectives.

Questions serve not merely as prompts for information retrieval but as instruments of agenda-setting, sensemaking, and reframing. How we select and articulate questions influences which needs are surfaced, whose perspectives are included, and what forms of knowledge are legitimized.

For example, an evaluative question like “Did this program raise the standardized test scores for fifth grade reading for at-risk students?” yields a more narrow set of responses than questions like “What enables certain at-risk students to complete their education despite structural barriers?” Both are necessary, but the latter opens the aperture to different insights that may otherwise be overlooked.

Similarly, a question about differentiated mobility patterns at night by gender challenges infrastructure planning to become more inclusive when compared with a question about general mobility patterns at night. Constructing this question requires the participation of those with knowledge of or personal experience with a possible gender-differentiated pattern.

How questions are framed—and by whom—shapes both the diagnosis of societal problems and the solutions that are pursued.

Emerging from The GovLab and [similar experiments](#), this new science of questions is guided by a few principles:

- **INCLUSIVITY:** Effective questions are co-designed with those who are most affected by the issues under examination, ensuring relevance and legitimacy.
- **ETHICAL GROUNDING:** Questions should explicitly recognize the values and trade-offs inherent in inquiry, avoiding the reinforcement of existing biases and inequality, starting from who is asking the questions.
- **TECHNICAL FEASIBILITY:** Good questions acknowledge current data limitations and methodological constraints while maintaining ambition.
- **ITERATIVE DEVELOPMENT:** Questions should be treated as evolving hypotheses, subject to refinement as new insights emerge and conditions change.

Philanthropy is particularly well positioned to advance this approach given the sector’s relative autonomy from electoral and market pressures. Foundations can deepen their impact by investing in the systematic exploration of emerging questions, building internal and external capacities for inquiry, and embedding questioning processes into strategy and evaluation frameworks.

For instance, a question-led model of grantmaking might begin by convening affected communities, researchers, and practitioners through something like “Q-Labs” ([Question labs](#)) - not to present predefined projects, but to collaboratively identify critical gaps in knowledge and understanding and to co-define questions. Evaluation processes could then assess both programmatic outcomes and the quality and inclusiveness of the questions that guided programmatic efforts. This type of evaluation looks beyond traditional results-oriented indicators, and refocuses on what learnings the initiative produced and how it impacted the broader field.

In an environment increasingly shaped by algorithmic decision-making and societal fragmentation, strengthening the capacity to formulate meaningful, inclusive, and actionable questions is not merely a technical improvement; it is foundational to democratic resilience and public trust. Fostering a culture of inquiry can surface neglected perspectives, foster humility among decision-makers, and ensure that technological and financial investments address actual community needs rather than reinforcing pre-existing inequities.

Ultimately, the [future of philanthropy](#) and of [governance more broadly](#) depends not solely on the sophistication of our answers, but on the care, rigor, and inclusivity with which we formulate our questions.

Building a systematic science of questions offers a critical pathway for ensuring that discovery, innovation, and problem-solving are aligned with the public interest.

“The future of philanthropy and governance broadly depends on the care, rigor, and inclusivity with which we form questions.”



Different Questions Prompt Different Actions

The examples below show how reframing shifts what organizations fund and how they measure success. Both approaches provide value, but the questions determine where organizations focus their resources and energy.

Affordable Housing

Narrow: How can we reduce homelessness in our city by 20%?

Actions: Build shelters, expand rapid rehousing programs, coordinate service providers through a continuum of care, offer case management to individuals, measure reduction in unsheltered population

Reframed: What are the interconnected systems (e.g., labor markets, healthcare, criminal justice) that determine who can access stable housing, and where are the highest-leverage intervention points?

Different Actions: Map eviction patterns, advocate for criminal record expungement policies that remove barriers to housing, partner with employers to create stable employment pathways, challenge zoning laws that restrict affordable housing development, invest in community land trusts to remove housing from speculative markets, fund research on how different interventions affect various subpopulations

Focus shifts from managing homelessness to dismantling the systems that produce it

Public Interest Technology

Narrow: How can we ensure AI is used ethically?

Actions: Develop ethical AI principles and frameworks, conduct algorithmic bias audits, create review boards to assess AI deployments, provide ethics training for developers, establish voluntary industry standards, measure AI systems for fairness metrics, publish transparency reports, implement human-in-the-loop safeguards

Reframed: Who gets to define “ethical AI,” whose values are embedded in these systems, and what power dynamics do AI systems reinforce or disrupt?

Different Actions: Fund organizing efforts by communities affected by AI systems (e.g., gig workers, people targeted by predictive policing, tenants facing algorithmic screening) to define their own demands, support participatory design processes where end users co-create AI systems from the ground up, investigate and expose how AI concentrates power in tech companies and governments, advocate for public ownership models for foundational AI infrastructure, document how AI systems encode existing inequalities and whose interests they serve, build coalitions across movements (e.g., labor, racial justice, privacy rights) to challenge AI’s role in surveillance and control

Focus shifts from technical fixes to power and governance

Mental Health

Narrow: How do we expand access to therapy for underserved populations?

Actions: Recruit bilingual therapists, offer sliding scale fees, partner with community health centers, provide telehealth options, train providers in cultural competency, measure therapy utilization rates

Reframed: How do different communities understand and address mental health, and what healing practices already exist that we might support?

Different Actions: Fund community healing circles led by cultural practitioners, support peer support networks designed by people with lived experience, invest in community spaces for connection, advocate for recognition and payment of Indigenous healing practices within healthcare systems

Focus shifts from clinical therapy to a portfolio of options that honors multiple healing traditions

Civic Engagement

Narrow: How do we increase voter turnout?

Actions: Conduct voter registration drives, send get-out-the-vote reminders, provide rides to polling places, educate people about when and where to vote, simplify ballot language, extend early voting hours, advocate for vote-by-mail, measure turnout rates by demographic, celebrate civic participation

Reframed: What makes people feel their participation matters, and what would need to change about democratic institutions to make that feeling justified?

Different Actions: Organize listening campaigns to understand why people abstain from voting and what issues matter most to them, support participatory budgeting processes that give communities direct control over public resources, advocate for ranked-choice voting and other structural reforms that make elections more responsive, fund community organizing that builds power between elections (not just during campaign season), document how money in politics drowns out ordinary voices and push for public financing, challenge gerrymandering and voter suppression through litigation and organizing

Focus shifts from driving turnout to rebuilding democratic legitimacy through institutional transformation and authentic community power.



Chapter Two

The Case for Questions in Philanthropy

How can philanthropy use questions to advance its impact? What are some ways that philanthropy can respond to a changing world?

By: Laura Maher, Siegel Family Endowment

From Incremental to Transformation

OVER THE YEARS, philanthropy has evolved to meet changing needs, whether supporting local news, building infrastructure for public interest law, or protecting the climate. Methodologies including participatory grantmaking, trust-based philanthropy, and co-designed strategies have supported this evolution. Funders have invested in [pooled funds](#), provided capacity building support, and explored new financial vehicles like [donor advised funds](#) (DAFs) and [family offices and limited liability companies](#) (LLCs). Some platforms are beginning to incorporate emerging technologies (e.g., [PJMF's Grant Guardian](#) and [Fast Forward's Nonprofit AI Policy Builder](#)) to support this work.

Yet philanthropy's core mechanics and philosophy remain largely unchanged. Many in the sector follow familiar patterns: needs assessments, expert input, due diligence, and proposal-to-report life cycles. The sector's underlying logic still centers on things like the wealth holders' individual identities. Foundation teams typically identify problems, select solutions, and measure predetermined outcomes rather than questioning whether those processes serve the communities themselves and the complexity of today's challenges. While

recent innovations in philanthropic practice are powerful, they too often remain tools for supporting existing workflows rather than transforming how philanthropy operates.

These challenges arrive at a moment when public expectations of institutions are shifting. Americans' trust in [institutions](#) and [one another](#) are at historical lows. Citizens increasingly demand responsive systems, whether through [participatory budgeting experiments](#) or community-owned technology alternatives to corporations, such as [Platform.Coop](#) and [Alkemio](#).

Philanthropy exists *within* this broader transformation and must adapt to keep pace. In an era when trust in institutions depends on demonstrable responsiveness, an inquiry-driven approach can help philanthropy's legitimacy and relevance. Incremental improvements will not suffice when challenges are fast-moving, complex, and interconnected. Moreover, philanthropy cannot presume to know or understand all emerging problems; funders must work *with* communities to stay current on evolving threats and opportunities and to prioritize which challenges to tackle and how.

A focus on questions may seem trivial, but it offers an avenue for modernizing philanthropy in order to address today's complex challenges.



What Questions Unlock in Grantmaking

By infusing questions throughout the grantmaking process, we can transform philanthropic practice and impact.

1

Breakthrough Solutions

QUESTIONS HAVE remarkable power to challenge our mental models, reframe problems, and drive towards breakthrough solutions. When we prioritize open inquiry over predetermined solutions, we naturally surface blind spots, uncover hidden assumptions, and reframe problems in ways that reveal new possibilities.

“Well-crafted questions are a way to set bold goals and involve more people,” says Tom Kalil, CEO of Renaissance Philanthropy. “It’s the difference between saying, ‘Let’s do more in outer space’ and, ‘How might we put an astronaut on the moon by the end of the decade?’” The framing of our questions shapes not only what solutions we consider possible but which ones *we can even imagine*.

Shared questions also create natural bridges between sectors, disciplines, and communities, fostering the collaboration needed to address complex challenges. As author and journalist Warren Berger notes in his book *A More Beautiful Question*, we’re witnessing the rise of “connective intelligence,” the ability to see across disciplines and connect insights from different fields. An inquiry-based approach will typically lead to more complex, less siloed questions, unlocking opportunities for bold, cross-disciplinary and cross-sector thinking

and intellectual arbitrage.

For example, what if foundations adopted venture capital’s talent development approach, supporting mergers of overlapping grantees, facilitating leadership transitions when needed, and maintaining a ready bench of specialized talent that could be deployed across multiple grantees, rather than treating each organization’s team as fixed? Or conversely, what if venture capital applied philanthropy’s long-term impact thinking, asking “*How will this investment affect society in 20 years?*” rather than focusing primarily on 5-7 year exit strategies?

Inquiry-driven philanthropy is at the forefront of this evolution, transforming not just how we fund change, but how we collectively make sense of an increasingly complex world.

“The framing of our questions shapes not only what solutions we consider possible but which ones we can even imagine.”

2

Adaptability in the Face of Complex, Rapidly-Changing Systems

TODAY’S INTERCONNECTED challenges—from economic inequality to lack of trust in institutions—defy linear solutions. An inquiry-driven approach leverages continual questioning and learning to map the factors, conditions, and fields that offer promise in addressing these challenges, revealing opportunities that might otherwise remain invisible. Such continual learning mirrors the dynamism of systems, and lends itself to comprehensive solutions, rather than ones based on partial understanding.

Shared questions also create the conditions for meaningful dialogue about results and provide natural opportunities for grantees to adapt as circumstances change or new information emerges. At Siegel Family Endowment, we have seen firsthand how this kind of inquiry can create the conditions for open discussion and adaptive learning.

For example, our learning question with grantee Modern Classrooms Project (MCP) asked: *How can Modern Classrooms research and codify its teacher leadership model to*

increase its organizational capacity to train educators and influence the broader field of organizations working to redefine the role of the educator?

We initially worked with MCP staff to scale a promising teacher leadership model. But over the course of the grant, our collective understanding of “scale” evolved. Rather than simply expanding the *number of credentialed educators*, we learned that meaningful growth happens when we build *regional ecosystems* of teacher leaders who can anchor implementation in local contexts. This shared learning prompted a strategic shift from driving scale through volume, to deepening quality and sustainability through localized networks.

By examining a shared question rather than striving to meet fixed targets, we created space for honest reflection and course correction. As a result, both the MCP team and the Siegel team were able to adapt as new insights emerged, allowing us to ground our investment in the conditions that sustain high-quality, community-based learning ecosystems over time.

3

Closer Alignment with Community Priorities

FOUNDATION STAFF, despite their considerable talents, expertise, and lived experience, remain at least one step removed from the work. This reality demands new approaches to how questions and priorities are developed among philanthropies, the public sector, nonprofit organizations, and the communities they serve. Involving the people closest to a problem in agenda-setting offers the opportunity to shed biases and assumptions, and adopt new lenses into our thinking.

For example, at Siegel, we recently gathered [grantees operating in rural areas to discuss shared challenges and opportunities](#). In our initial consultation, we asked the following questions: *How do technology or digital spaces impact key systems and/or your work? What are the benefits and the drawbacks?* While we expected to find AI skepticism and lagging

adoption, what we heard was quite different; participants expressed positive attitudes toward generative AI and were eager to develop ways to use AI in their communities. Participants also believed that smaller, place-based organizations were better positioned to innovate with AI due to their size and social connections, a belief that runs counter to mainstream narratives about scale.

Armed with shared questions, a group of participants in the rural convening came up with a plan to challenge urban-centric narratives about educational innovation. They planned to document rural AI success stories and connect with other rural organizations, in order to reshape how foundations think about technology adoption in small communities (including by appearing on panels at [major education conferences](#)).



The Power of Questions in Reframing Solutions for Companies

1.

3M Post-it Notes

From "How do we make *stronger* adhesive?" to "How do we use *weak* adhesive?"

When 3M scientist Spencer Silver accidentally created a weak, pressure-sensitive adhesive that could be easily removed, he initially asked, "How do we fix this failed adhesive?" A colleague, Art Fry, who had found a use for the adhesive marking pages in church hymnals, reframed the question as "How can we use an adhesive that sticks lightly and removes cleanly?" This [eventually led to Post-it Notes](#), transforming a "failed" experiment into one of 3M's most successful products.

2.

Southwest Airlines

From "How do we compete with major *airlines*?" to "How do we compete with *buses*?"

Southwest Airlines was founded on the principles of service and affordability. Southwest's founders did not ask, "How do we offer better airline service?" Instead, they asked "How do we make flying as affordable and simple as taking a bus?" By starting with direct flights to major Texas cities within an hour's flying time, the airline was able to establish fares below driving costs for the same route, [resulting in a 1000% increase in traffic](#) in newly served city-pair markets within a year. This led to Southwest's [low-cost, point-to-point model](#) (short, high-frequency routes to in-demand destinations rather than hub-and-spoke layovers), simplified operations, and made air travel accessible to entirely new market segments.

Grantees become co-investigators rather than service providers, contributing expertise that is valued and integrated into broader learning agendas.

4

Knowledge Sharing for the Larger System

FOUNDATIONS COLLECTIVELY hold vast knowledge within their institutional walls, yet they often lack both the structures and incentives to systematically share insights with peers and the broader sector. Meanwhile, the proliferation of data and technological tools offers unprecedented opportunities to integrate learning across foundations and nonprofits, enabling better understanding of complex systems, and better coordinated decision-making across the philanthropic sector.

Inquiry-driven grantmaking is uniquely positioned to create better incentives for knowledge sharing and better systems for doing so. "Philanthropy contributes as one part of an ever-changing system in which we have never solved our societal challenges," says

Alex Fischer, member of Australia's Dusseldorp Forum and one of the early architects behind the Paul Ramsay Foundation's curiosity-driven approach. "When philanthropists seek impact in a larger system, we have the opportunity to ask questions differently, test them faster, and do so in partnership with communities and other sectors. [We can use] questions as a bridging language to connect the different experiences [across] common goals." Such a shared inquiry creates a common vocabulary for collaboration between funders and grantees, and among funders themselves. Inquiry-driven grantmaking allows foundations with different approaches, geographies, and focus areas to contribute to collective understanding while maintaining their distinct strategies and values.

5

Built-in Mechanisms for Continuous Improvement

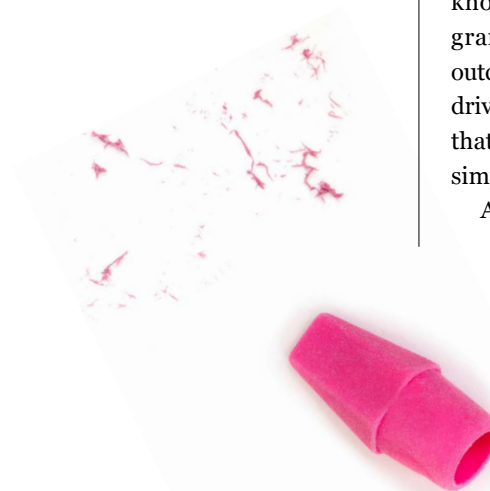
AT ITS CORE, inquiry-driven philanthropy is built on a process of continual learning: co-creating questions, testing hypotheses, and sharing what we learn back into the system to refine inquiries. Each set of learnings generates new questions or actions designed to improve grantmaking effectiveness, strengthen grantee work, and better serve the constituents that grantees seek to help.

"A strategy based on inquiry looks less like an accountability mechanism and more of a learning framework," says Zia Khan, who formerly led programs and innovation at the Rockefeller Foundation. "Building a disciplined approach to proactively generating and sharing knowledge is different from monitoring a grant's implementation and assessing its outcomes." This distinction is crucial. Inquiry-driven work prioritizes knowledge generation that can inform future decisions rather than simply judging past performance.

Applying the scientific method to

philanthropy maintains both rigor and adaptability by preserving systematic data collection and analysis while embracing uncertainty as a feature, not a bug. The process requires us to continue collecting evidence and making determinations about program effectiveness, but within a framework that expects hypotheses to evolve as conditions change. This approach recognizes that what works in one context or moment may not work in another. As a result, it is important to adopt a strategy of disciplined measurement and flexible response.

Improvement occurs when philanthropy acts on what it is learning, whether through sharing learnings with key stakeholders or changing assumptions and behaviors. At Siegel Family Endowment, we do not believe that complex societal problems are ever truly "solved," but we aim to continuously improve, infusing new nuance and bringing new stakeholders into the conversation with each new learning.





The Power of Questions in Reframing Solutions for Nonprofits and Funders

1. Grameen Bank

From "How do we help the poor save money?" to "How do we make the poor creditworthy?"

When Muhammad Yunus began working in rural Bangladesh, the conventional question was how to help impoverished people, especially women, save small amounts. Yunus reframed this to ask why poor people were considered unbankable in the first place. This led to microcredit, the practice of lending small amounts without collateral to groups of borrowers who guarantee each other's loans. Grameen Bank [famously achieved 98% repayment rates](#), demonstrating that the poor were excellent credit risks when the system was redesigned around their realities. This question sparked a global microfinance movement.

2. Homeboy Industries

From "How do we reduce gang violence?" to "What do former gang members need to transform their lives?"

Father Greg Boyle shifted from the conventional question about suppressing gang activity to asking what healing and opportunity looked like for people trying to leave gang life. Rather than creating another job training program, Homeboy Industries creates actual businesses (bakeries, cafes, silkscreen shops, etc.) where former gang members work alongside former rivals, building community while developing skills. The question reframe led to a holistic model that addresses trauma, not just employment. They also offer wraparound services including therapy, tattoo removal, legal services, and education. They serve more than [10,000 people annually](#) and have become a [blueprint for more than 250 similar programs globally](#).

3. Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ)

From "How do we improve schools in poor neighborhoods?" to "What would it take to change the odds for an entire community of children?"

Geoffrey Canada shifted from the typical education reform question about fixing schools to asking what comprehensive support looked like from birth through college. Rather than just running better after-school programs, HCZ created a 97-block ["cradle-to-career"](#) of services, including prenatal programs, early childhood education, charter schools, health clinics, and community centers. The reframed question led to a place-based, multi-generational approach that influenced the federal Promise Neighborhoods initiative.

4. Siegel Family Endowment

From "How do we improve schools?" to "What if we viewed schools as multidimensional community infrastructure?"

In 2022, Siegel published [a whitepaper](#) that proposed viewing schools through a lens that recognized overlapping spheres of digital, social, and physical infrastructure. The paper articulated how schools and communities could leverage that infrastructure to build connections that strengthened both groups. The question sparked conversations across the field, unlocked new funding streams like the [Learning Landscapes Challenge](#), and inspired new waves of research (e.g., Learner Studio's [Public Purpose Utilities for the Future of Learning](#)), and partnerships including work with Stanford's d.school on leveraging multidimensional infrastructure to deepen community understanding of technology.

6

Balancing Power Dynamics

BY NATURE of their financial resources, philanthropic foundations are often situated as the decision-maker, deciding why, where, when and to whom they allocate their resources, as well as how they engage with their partners and grantees. Starting with an inquiry-driven approach could fundamentally shift some of those power dynamics.

Alex Fischer of Australia's Dusseldorp Forum notes that a shared, inclusive, and responsive inquiry approach can establish the basis of genuine partnership and mutual responsibility between grantees and funders. "It's not about a foundation granting and a nonprofit implementing, but instead becomes a continuous conversation, connecting wider networks around shared agendas and funding," Fischer reflects. "Foundations can be more than just a source of grants, instead listening and learning as part of a wider societal innovation process."

Historically, philanthropy has privileged academic or institutional expertise while overlooking community knowledge and lived experience. This pattern has been [acknowledged by foundation leaders](#), documented in [institutional self-assessments](#), and reflected in [demographic data on foundation board and staff](#).¹ A well-designed inquiry-driven approach should include elements that addresses these entrenched power imbalances, such as by

centering questions that emerge from and matter to affected communities.

At Siegel Family Endowment, we begin by asking community partners to identify the questions that keep them up at night. This approach invites grantees to set the agenda for inquiry rather than responding to our foundation's predetermined priorities. This step also creates space for grantees to shape their own questions and evidence plans, with their insights directly informing our foundation's strategic evolution. As Tom Kalil of Renaissance Philanthropy explains, "Questions invite us to examine not just what we're doing, but what we're *not* doing that we should be, and what we're currently doing that we should *stop*."

This creates a more reciprocal relationship where partners' experiences actively reshape philanthropic practice. Grantees become co-investigators rather than service providers, contributing expertise that is valued and integrated into broader learning agendas. Biases and ego persist in the work, but the inquiry model moves toward more equitable footing by redistributing both the responsibility for learning and the authority to define what questions matter most. The result is more authentic buy-in from all stakeholders and solutions that reflect genuine community priorities.

A New Paradigm for a New Era

QUESTION-DRIVEN philanthropy is not a cure-all for addressing complex social problems. It's a complementary set of practices and underlying culture that can help funders work more effectively, efficiently, holistically, and inclusively. The goal is to *expand* philanthropy's repertoire, not replace what is known to work. The shift toward inquiry-driven philanthropy

represents not only a tactical adjustment, but a fundamental reimaging of how philanthropic resources can best serve communities and catalyze change. The next section details some of the ways this approach can be integrated into philanthropic processes, and how elevating questions can create a more humble, adaptive, and effective approach to advancing the common good.

¹ The 2024 Foundation Operations and Management Report reveals white individuals, who make up 59% of the U.S. population, are overrepresented on foundation boards at 89%, while BIPOC individuals, representing 41% of the population, account for only 11% of board members.

Chapter Three

Inquiry-Driven Grantmaking: A Questions Approach for Philanthropy

How can we design a grantmaking process that is grounded in the science of questions? What do we gain by infusing questions in philanthropy? What do we risk?

By: Amanda Ahern and Kyla Kasharian, Siegel Family Endowment

Inquiry at Siegel Family Endowment

SINCE SIEGEL Family Endowment's inception, our process has been fundamentally driven by questions. Over time, we have operationalized this mindset throughout our core processes, including the format of our grant proposals, the way we structure conversations with our grantees and partners, our dedicated Knowledge and Impact team, and across the broader team itself. This approach has coalesced into what we now define as "inquiry-driven grantmaking."

Inquiry-Driven Philanthropy

An approach to grantmaking based on an iterative process of asking questions, systematically interrogating them, and applying the findings to subsequent rounds of questioning.

Inquiry-driven philanthropy is inspired by the scientific method, and draws additional inspiration from various scientific and community-driven approaches. It is built on the notion that philanthropy does not hold all the answers to addressing tough societal challenges, but is well-positioned to ask big questions and bring together the right stakeholders to make progress towards answering those questions.

We are hardly the first grant-making institution to approach philanthropy in this way, and aspects of this process may feel familiar; in fact, we hope they do. We draw from a variety of philanthropic movements and experts that came before us, and now seek to contribute our own learnings back to the field.

We share a few key principles with trust-based philanthropy and participatory grantmaking, such as our commitment to sourcing ideas from communities, co-creating solutions with community, and sharing what we are learning across communities.

In addition, we are influenced by colleagues across many philanthropic organizations who pursue elements of our approach: questioning, researching, collecting evidence,

co-creating, testing, learning, iterating, sharing, and questioning again. We would be ill-positioned to make change were it not for their embrace of these methods and their probing questions about how to improve the inquiry-driven process further.

Siegel's inquiry-driven process begins with overarching questions developed for each portfolio. Each portfolio question contains a group of more targeted questions and a learning agenda developed alongside grantees. We work with grantees and partners to uncover academic evidence, conduct field work, and identify additional organizations that can help us to develop questions, test hypotheses, and co-interpret outcomes. We map this evidence back to the questions, with the learnings from the various targeted questions feeding into the macro question. Finally, we share learnings with relevant stakeholders and use findings to inform the next phase of inquiry.

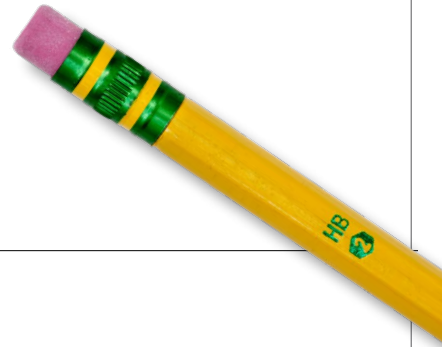
Over time, we've formalized processes and practices in our inquiry-driven approach, but the values and steps in the grantmaking lifecycle remain the same as at the time of Siegel Family Endowment's founding. We lead grant sourcing conversations with curiosity and focus on discerning how partners are addressing pressing questions, seeking to understand their unique perspectives. We aim to move beyond simple evaluation of organizations' past outcomes. In the inquiry-driven grant development process, we work with grantees² to jointly determine a learning agenda for our shared question, along with a custom evaluation and measurement plan rooted in what we hope to learn. We actively share early indicators and learnings throughout the grant term, working to ensure that knowledge and insights reach those best positioned for action. We also maintain flexibility to jointly adjust questions during the grant, if the situation changes or if early findings suggest the need to refocus the inquiry. At the conclusion of partnerships, we conduct retrospectives on learning and iterate towards our next questions.

In the sections that follow, we provide tactical examples from our process at Siegel and reflect on learnings to-date. We hope it may serve as a reference point to spark conversations among our peers as we collectively work toward building a more effective and equitable sector.

³ Not all grantees fall under this partnership structure; some are classified as separate initiatives adjacent to our core strategy areas

Example Inquiry-Driven Practices in the Grantmaking Lifecycle

The framework below maps how inquiry might function at each stage.³



1 Strategy Development

Example Questions For Foundations To Ask Of Themselves

- What should we be asking?
- Whose questions are we addressing?
- What do we know about this field from previous grantmaking?
- What do we not yet know?
- What are our assumptions?
- What level of confidence do we have that this field is well understood?
- Which aspects of this field are we uniquely equipped to address?
- What solutions have worked in this field and which have failed?
- How do gaps and strengths in Field X intersect with Field Y?

Example Actions

- Search for the unknown. Begin with “what we *don't* know” rather than “what we do know.”
- Invite communities, communities of practice, and beneficiaries to propose strategic inquiry questions for each funding area.
- Host listening sessions to present tentative questions and ask field experts what else *should* be asked.
- Use crowdsourcing to test, iterate, and re-ask core questions.
- Structure dissent by requiring at least one staff member to argue against proposed strategic questions during development, forcing articulation of assumptions.
- Uncover blind spots by recruiting staff from different teams and expertise areas to formulate questions and interrogate strategy.

Siegel Example

We begin our strategic development process by asking a big-picture, systems-level question sourced from our staff. We then conduct an interdisciplinary landscape review that asks fundamental questions such as, “What do we know about this field from previous grantmaking?” We also identify knowledge gaps by asking questions such as the following: What do we not yet know? What are our assumptions?

We then prioritize resources by asking questions such as the following: Which aspects are we uniquely equipped to address? How do gaps and strengths in Field X intersect with those in Field Y?

We incorporate questions crowdsourced from grantees, nonprofits, and peer organizations with relevant expertise, eventually defining specific questions within each of our portfolio areas. We continuously hone these questions by integrating new learnings from our ongoing grantmaking, moving on from some and deepening or shifting others.

2 Sourcing

Example Questions for Foundations to Ask of Experts and Partners in the Field

- Who might already have knowledge that can sharpen our questions?
- What are knowledge gaps in this area?
- Who might be able to generate new learnings where current gaps exist?
- What questions guide your work?
- What are the most confounding questions in your sector?
- What are funders missing?
- What audacious ideas do you have?

Example Actions

- Seek out leaders most *proximate* to the problems you’re trying to understand.
- Be curious about a partner’s curiosity. When meeting a new organization, first inquire about what the partner is curious about.
- Create ongoing advisory groups of people closest to problems and field experts that can help identify knowledge gaps and suggest who foundations should talk to.
- Issue calls for proposals organized around questions you are exploring, not program areas or predetermined solutions.
- Share driving questions and invite cross-sector, cross-field stakeholders to provide input, opening the door to cross-silo learning.

Siegel Example

Our partner sourcing centers curiosity and questions. When meeting a new organization, we explain our strategy, but also inquire about what our partners are curious about: What questions guide their work? What are the most confounding questions in their sector? What are funders missing? What is challenging to get funded? What is the most crucial gap to fill?

Starting with questions allows us to uncover streams of work that nonprofits wouldn’t typically propose or that field experts are not currently pursuing. We invite organizations to explain what they truly care and wonder about, and what audacious ideas they have.

³ Note: Siegel Endowment employs many, but not all, of these tactics



Proposal Development

3

Example Questions for Foundations to Ask of Themselves:

- How will this grant contribute to our collective learning?
- How does this work relate to our portfolio questions?
- What assumptions and theories are we testing in this grant? How will we test them?
- What evidence will show the grant’s effectiveness?
- How does that evidence contribute to answering the inquiry question?
- How will the activities and evidence generated by this grant impact the field?
- What stakeholders will be moved by the work in this grant, and how?
- What partners or perspectives need to be engaged in this work to make it worthwhile?

Example Actions

- Before writing a grant proposal, list three to five assumptions embedded in the proposed work. Make these explicit in the proposal.
- Identify the evidence needed to prove or disprove any hypotheses of impact advanced through the grant. Include this in proposals.
- Hold working sessions where foundation staff and the grantee collaboratively design the grant proposal around shared goals.
- Co-design bespoke grant metrics with grantees and offer multiple options for what “evidence” can look like (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, participatory).

Siegel Example

Siegel Grantmaking Managers co-author grant proposals with prospective grantees, collaboratively drafting hypotheses and statements of how grantees’ work relates to Siegel’s sub-portfolio questions.

Innovative questions often require new types of data collection methods and evidence sources. We remain flexible about the kinds of data grantees can use; the questions we hope to address will determine whether qualitative insights (e.g., interviews, case studies, observational data), quantitative metrics, or mixed methods are warranted. We also make it clear that grant renewal prospects are not contingent upon meeting traditional activity or impact metrics (such as the number of people served). Rather, we direct our focus towards both the quality of the project learnings and the ongoing relevance of those learnings to our questions.

4

Grantee Engagement

Example Questions for Foundations to Ask of Grantees and Themselves

- What are we learning together?
- What are the key learnings from the past six months?
- How will you apply these learnings moving forward?
- What unexpected findings have emerged?
- What questions are sharpening or evolving?
- Are pivots needed? How and when will we know?
- Is there anything happening in your field that is influencing your work?
- How should we apply these learnings at our foundation?

Example Actions

- Prioritize learning over evaluation. Shift check-ins from evaluation of performance to reflections on the learning partnership.
- Center the conversation on questions. Begin meetings by asking grantees what they are most curious about right now, before asking about progress.
- Remain flexible about the kinds of data prospective grantees can use. Some of the most powerful learning comes from mixed-method evidence.
- Commit to two-way sharing by encouraging grantmaking managers to share with grantees what they are learning and how they have responded.
- Redirect questions and/or strategy in response to learnings.
- Dedicate one quarterly staff meeting to “productive failures”—grants that didn’t work as planned but generated valuable insights.

Siegel Example

We engage grantees through semiannual check-ins that pair brief written updates with deeper conversations. The written reports are intentionally concise, designed to frame and focus the oral discussion. At the start of each year, we develop a set of broad field questions aligned with portfolio priorities. Grantmaking Managers draw from this shared question bank, including a common question asked of all grantees within each sub-portfolio to surface cross-cutting insights alongside more specific learnings. Grantees reflect on progress and what they are learning, and managers synthesize key takeaways across conversations and share them internally. Each year, we hold a strategy meeting to reflect on these insights and make targeted adjustments based on what we’ve learned, remaining questions, and signals from ongoing research and external engagement.

Learning and Synthesis

5

Example Questions for Foundations to Ask of Themselves

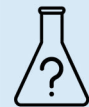
- What patterns are emerging across our work?
- What insights are emerging across our grantees?
- Where are the gaps in our accumulated knowledge?
- What have we learned? What do we do in response?
- How does our learning inform our strategy?

Example Actions:

- Organize peer learning circles in which grantees working on related questions interrogate each other's work and share emerging insights.
- Explicitly track how grantees' core questions change over time. Document what caused the shift.
- Consider applying a "What, So What, Now What" framing (see visual below) to distill learning and guide foundation staff to action.
- Foster discussions among foundation staff about learnings, encouraging collective sensemaking.

Siegel Example:

We are deliberate about how we gather and interpret information, ensuring that we systematically collect and synthesize insights over time and across grants and portfolios. We call this work Knowledge and Impact. We engage deeply with our grantees to surface insights that advance both Siegel's inquiry and their own. We share what we are learning with the broader field. We have also established internal structures (e.g., dedicated meetings and learning days, invited grantee speakers, and communities of practice) to help keep our work dynamic, responsive, and firmly rooted in inquiry.



Siegel uses the "What, So What, Now What" Framework for Learning

- 1 What?**
What have we learned? What evidence have we gathered? Does it support our hypothesis?
- 2 So What?**
What conclusions can we draw from this? Why does this matter? How does it change our thinking?
- 3 Now What?**
What will we do with these insights? How will we share this out to the field? Do we need to iterate on our questions or plan?

For What? Defining our goals, identifying key stakeholders and how best to engage them

6

Sharing

Example Questions for Foundations to Ask of Themselves

- Who needs to hear what we've learned?
- What insights are important for different audiences to hear?
- How should most effectively adapt the message and format?
- What did we get wrong that needs correction?
- What gaps remain in our understanding?
- How can we help grantees shape the narrative of their own work?

Example Actions

- Publish learning questions externally and invite relevant stakeholders to contribute evidence or insights.
- Begin publications with the questions that prompted the project, not the answers or insights that came in response to those questions.
- Create standing groups with non-grantees (e.g., academics, practitioners, policymakers) who offer unique perspectives and can help interpret findings and challenge conclusions.
- Share compelling questions from grantmaking work in newsletters, on social media, or through internal communications.
- Make insights collective rather than proprietary. Build and contribute to shared platforms in which multiple foundations contribute learning about similar questions.
- Fund and publish documentation of what didn't work and why, treating failures as valuable as successes.

Siegel Example

Dedicated staff time for narrative building and internal knowledge management has strengthened an organization-wide focus on these questions. The External Engagement team works closely with Grantmaking to develop and evolve narrative strategies for each sub-portfolio, while also supporting grantees in advancing their communications goals. This includes ongoing one-on-one support with grantees to refine messaging, address communications challenges, and situate their work within broader ecosystem efforts to shift narratives and strengthen storytelling infrastructure. It also includes Siegel-led communications, convenings, and narrative-building initiatives that elevate cross-cutting insights through targeted interventions. In parallel, the Knowledge and Impact team partners with External Engagement to map insights to specific audiences, using visual tools, team learning sessions, and targeted research to surface gaps and translate findings into strategic updates and new grantmaking opportunities.



Risks of an Inquiry-Driven Approach

We recognize that an inquiry-driven approach comes with risks and challenges. A few of the potential hurdles we've encountered include the following:

The Need to Redefine Success

Adopting an inquiry-driven approach to grantmaking requires a fundamental redefinition of what constitutes success, moving away from traditional metrics of immediate impact and toward valuing the learning process itself. This shift demands significant organizational trust, as funders must openly commit to a learning journey without predetermined outcomes or the ability to point to traditional validations of philanthropic investments.

We believe that genuine learning requires substantial time devoted to processes and reflection, which can come in conflict with pre-set grantmaking timelines and a desire for clear cut results within one grant cycle. These competing imperatives can be mitigated by developing clear learning goals that provide structure for the inquiry process and create decision points for pivoting strategies based on emerging insights. In this way, decisions are made not by the achievement of timebound predicted outcomes, but by the quality of questions asked, the rigor of investigation, and the organization's capacity to adapt and improve its approach based on what is learned.

Asking "Weak" Questions

Asking a "weak" question can have downstream effects. For example, we might ask a prescriptive question when we should

be asking a descriptive one. That is, instead of asking "What is going on?" (descriptive) we ask "How might we fix XYZ issue?" (prescriptive). The latter question implies that we already know what the problem is. If we instead ask "What is going on in XYZ community?" then we allow for our grantees and their communities to define the problem. Being okay with releasing control over what we think we know is a sometimes uncomfortable, but crucial part of this work.

When formulating a question, we borrow from Stefaan Verhulst's [taxonomy of questions](#) (see graphic). We consider the type of question we should be asking: descriptive, diagnostic, predictive, and prescriptive.

Capacity and Time

An inquiry-driven approach requires internal staff time, capacity, and willingness to embrace complexity and ambiguity. We recognize that not every organization has these to dedicate. We also recognize that traditional grant cycles are tightly structured and move quickly, often without the time needed for question formation, reflection, and iteration. That said, there are many ways to think about introducing inquiry into your approach. Our one page guides at the end of this paper provide ideas for how this work can be contextualized within different roles.

Lack of Standardized Metrics

Unlike traditional grantmaking and evaluation methods, a questions-driven approach will not produce the same types of quantitative data points that foundation boards and leadership teams might be used to receiving from their grantees. A questions-driven approach values consistency in principles and practice over standardization. This does not mean that this method is without rigor. For us, rigor is found in the reflection, synthesis, sensemaking and iteration based on learnings. Our role-specific implementation guides (particularly for measurement staff and senior leadership) detail how to translate this approach into board-ready insights, tracking question evolution, documenting pivots and their rationale, and presenting learning narratives alongside traditional metrics.

Grantees' Willingness to Engage in this Approach

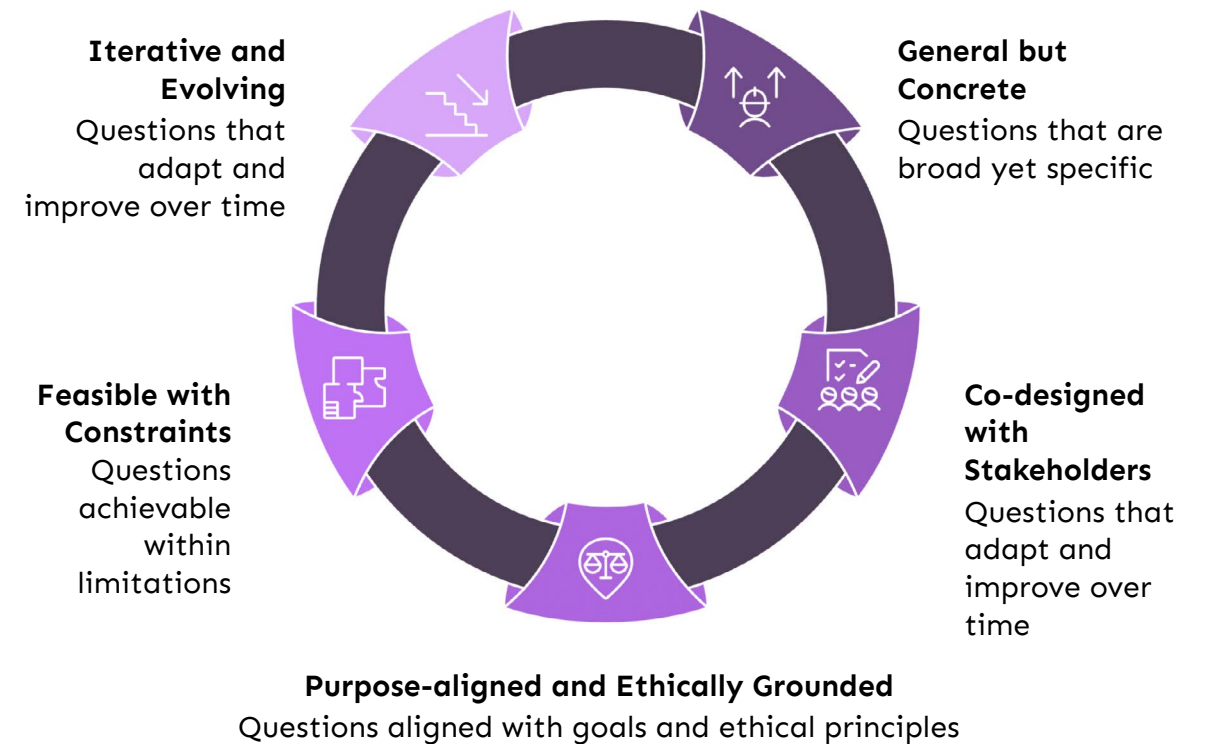
An inquiry-driven approach requires buy-in from grantee partners. Not all nonprofits are pursuing work that lends itself to an inquiry-driven approach. In addition, not all nonprofits will have the appetite to participate in the inquiry-driven approach. To address this challenge, foundation staff must come from a place of transparency about the process from the first sourcing call forward.

A Taxonomy of Questions

In his paper [Inquiry as Infrastructure: Defining Good Questions in the Age of Data and AI](#), Stefaan Verhulst lays out five essential criteria for question quality:

Inquiry as Infrastructure: Defining Good Questions in the Age of Data and AI

Characteristics of Good Questions



Chapter Four

Building the Infrastructure for Inquiry-Driven Philanthropy

What might philanthropy unlock by adopting a questions approach, either incrementally or at scale? What infrastructure is needed to support this shift? How can the sector learn and adapt collectively? What would it take for shared questions to catalyze larger and more lasting change?

By: Laura Maher, Siegel Family Endowment

IF YOU'VE READ THIS FAR, we hope you are curious to use inquiry-driven approaches in your philanthropic practice. There's no single way to do this work. We invite you to thoughtfully experiment with inquiry, whether through modest experiments or transformative shifts.

Yet individual foundations adopting inquiry-driven approaches are not enough to transform the sector. To make space for inquiry to happen at scale, we need new infrastructure. We need new skills and abilities as individuals and organizations. We need communities of practice where funders can safely experiment with uncertainty. We need frameworks for measuring learning alongside outcomes. Most critically, we need new norms that grant permission for both funders and grantees to pursue unexpected directions. Building this culture requires new processes that activate curiosity, creating environments where transparency is welcome and questioning becomes as valued as knowing.

This infrastructure must support genuine evolution of questions. Questions should

sharpen as we learn, shift as conditions change, and sometimes be retired entirely. This requires documenting question genealogies: how questions emerged, what caused them to evolve, which were abandoned and why, and what new questions emerged from the insights generated. The ultimate measure of inquiry-driven philanthropy is not the elegance of our questions but our willingness to formulate new questions according to the evidence that we collect and the insights that we glean.

Ultimately, this infrastructure needs to be extended across the entire philanthropic sector, not just within individual foundations. Imagine collaborative databases or repositories where funders document productive questions, illuminating failures, and unexpected discoveries. Such platforms could help to identify unexplored questions and connect funders pursuing related inquiries. The impact of such field-wide learning systems could be profound, transforming how philanthropy learns collectively.

So how do we do this? We need to build practice and community on three levels:



Where To Go From Here

1

Within Your Foundation: Start Where You Are

The shift toward questions is not about abandoning what works; it is about adapting based on what is learned. Interested in incorporating inquiry into your philanthropic practice? The appendix offers practical tools for integrating questions across various types of roles.

Inquiry-driven philanthropy is evolving, and we're all learning how best to structure and act on questions. The field needs practitioners willing to document experiences, share failures alongside successes, and collectively build knowledge.

2

Across Fields and Sectors: Build Open and Transparent Learning Ecosystems

When foundations move beyond isolated grantmaking toward shared inquiry, genuine learning ecosystems emerge. These networks of funders, practitioners, and communities are united not just by common causes, but by common questions that transcend organizational boundaries.

We envision networks organized around shared questions: groups of

funders and grantees exploring shared inquiries such as "How do we bolster the next generation of journalists equipped to navigate evolving realities?" ([AI + Ed Media Cohort](#)) or "What opportunities do emerging technologies present that are uniquely valuable to rural communities?" ([Rural Grantee Cohort](#)).

3

For the Science of Questions: Advance the Emerging Discipline

The sector needs communities contributing to the science of questioning itself, facilitating productive inquiry, crafting constructive questions, recognizing when questions constrain rather than open possibilities, and building organizational cultures that embrace curiosity over certainty.

Connect with our partners at Data4Philanthropy [or Q-Lab] or explore the work of organizations like the Right Question Institute who are advancing this emerging field. Together, we can build the knowledge infrastructure that advances and sustains inquiry-driven philanthropy.



Final Thoughts

By embracing an inquiry-driven approach, we can begin to modernize and democratize philanthropic practice to better meet the moment. As the complexity of social challenges continues to grow, it is vitally important that we ask better questions and expand who gets to ask them.

The science of questions offers us a pathway forward, not toward easy answers, but toward deeper understanding and more transformative possibilities.

We welcome the opportunity to learn alongside you.

Get in touch with us at hello@siegelendowment.org.