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'Mars and Venus' in philanthropy

Premium

by Fiona Higgins | October 6, 2016

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It's time to step away from the outdated roles of 'grantmaker' and 'grantseeker' says Fiona Higgins, and instead establish relationships that put social change at their centre.



Scan any fundraising or philanthropy conference program, and you'll likely find a professional education opportunity entitled *How to Communicate with Funders, Writing Winning Grant Applications or Engaging with Grantmakers*. It's as if funders conduct themselves in a foreign language that requires decoding by translators.

To use a metaphor popularised by US psychologist John Gray, it's as though *grantmakers are from Mars and grantseekers are from Venus*. If only the latter could crack the former's special code, then a relationship could finally flourish.

This is a false dichotomy, in my view, and not an ideal starting point for a conversation about social change which is the fundamental aspiration driving relationships in the social sector.

Yet the great schism continues, perpetuated by unwieldy processes and punitive communication on the part of (some) funders, and unassisted by charities that (understandably) find it hard to speak truth to power.

Whether we admit to it or not, most funder-charity relationships are subject to *an unequal power dynamic*.

Where funders recognise this, there are two possible responses: to quietly thank their lucky stars for finding themselves in the dominant position, or to do everything within their power to subvert the dynamic, individually and institutionally.

Choosing the latter was what prompted me, a decade ago at the **Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation**, to conduct the first Grantee Feedback Survey implemented by a major foundation in Australia. It was edgy at the time, but these days it's standard practice for funders with the human and financial resources to apply in this direction.

For smaller funders, there are simpler measures which can lead to a significant improvement in their relationships with charities:

1 – Reframe the conversation

Language counts. Funders can stop calling their charitable partners 'grantees' or 'grantseekers'—as if they are supplicants—and themselves 'grantmakers', as if they are making more than an EFT transfer.

The terms 'grantseekers' and 'grantmakers' put the *grant*—the transaction—at the centre of the relationship, rather than the social change both parties wish to see.

While some funders give more than money – time, skills and networks – in most philanthropic relationships, funders are **catalysts and enablers**, while charities are **doers and implementers**.

Funders often think of themselves as risk takers and agents of change in their funding decisions, but the *really* hard work lies in the field. Let's recognise the primacy of charities in actually *delivering* the social change our partnerships aim to stimulate, and enshrine this primacy in the way we frame the conversation.

2 – Be generous with your communication style – not just your funding



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More than \$75,000 in total

Inner North Community Foundation to 20 charitable organisations in Darebin, Moreland and Yarra.	\$360,000
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Greater Charitable Foundation to Sutherland Shire Carer Support Service	\$50,000
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Like any other relationship, if you wish to cultivate an authentic and mutually satisfying exchange, both sides need to listen with humility, have a respectful tone, a patient temperament, and admit it when they're wrong.

Challenges and failure can bring both parties closer, but we have to admit when we're struggling—to ourselves and to each other. And like the best kind of long-term partnership, you have to be able to call out each other's weaknesses, without fear of reprisal.

3 – Institutionalise simplicity

One of the beauties of philanthropy is that it's not government: it can be uniquely nimble and flexible. Which is why it's surprising when a funder chooses to use multi-step, convoluted and sometimes impenetrable processes—of a style that mimics government departments—as the starting point for its relationships with charities.

After seventeen years on 'both sides' of the sector, I believe there's beauty in simplicity. Funders might wish to consider:

Being doggedly purpose-driven. If you are crystal clear and specific about your own purpose, it's easier for charities to self-benchmark against funding criteria (before they even contact you). This helps ease the administrative burden on charities which, somewhat ironically, funders are usually loath to support. At [Australian Philanthropic Services](#), we use a process called 'The Giving Compass' which helps funders crystallise the change they wish to see and support via their funding.

Stripping back bureaucracy. Have a phone call as the first point of contact with charities, or seek expressions of interest via a two-minute 'video pitch' recordable on a mobile device. Work through a charity's needs and goals at face-to-face meetings, and jointly determine what else they might need (aside from your funding). Only use a funding application form as a formality, when funding is almost guaranteed to be forthcoming.

Avoiding metrics mania. Only capture data that you will use to inform future decision-making, and dare to share the results of your evaluative efforts with others in the sector. Spend more time understanding a charity's business and ecosystem and less time obsessing about the minutiae. Resurrect the 'sniff test'—it usually works.

There's an opportunity cost in not advancing the most constructive charity-funder relationships we can create, but we'll never know exactly what that is. Almost certainly, information and true learning will be lost, outcomes and impacts will be compromised.

In the same way medicine has shifted from practitioner to patient-focused, and schools are focussing on students rather than systems, let's recognise the inherent power dynamic at play between funders and charities.

Let's take small steps, and in time, larger ones to deconstruct the 'Mars and Venus' paradigm at play in philanthropy, and move away from 'grant-focused', transactional relationships.

Let's move towards a deeper, more meaningful engagement that recognises the primacy of doers, the nimbleness of enablers, and the social change aspirations that unite us all.



Fiona Higgins is Senior Manager, Grantmaking & Evaluation at [Australian Philanthropic Services](#), a leading provider of PAF establishment, administration and grantmaking services in Australia. Fiona has been involved in the philanthropy and not-for-profit sector in Australia for the past seventeen years and currently serves on the board of the Royal Agricultural Society Foundation of NSW. Her prior roles include Executive Director of the Caledonia Foundation, Philanthropy Services Manager at Cambooya Services and Program Manager at the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation.

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