The Colorado Health Foundation™



The Space Around the “Yes” and the “No”

I remember what it was like working on the nonprofit side of the funding equation. I remember thinking of foundations as a “big black box” where your grant application goes in and (if you’re lucky) a decision comes out months later, often without any context. I remember the guessing game, and thinking program staff were powerful, even scary. Every site visit elicited anxiety from myself and my coworkers. The whole experience was stressful, and the unbalanced power dynamic was uncomfortably obvious.

When I transitioned to the funder side of the equation, I made a promise to myself to remember what that was like, and to treat people differently both inside and outside of the Foundation. In my role as a program officer, I see it as my responsibility to break down this “big black box” and toss it aside all together. Instead, I want to be seen as approachable, supportive and honest. Someone who cares about the same people, goals and challenges as the organizations we partner with.

At the Foundation, we strive to develop real, ongoing relationships with people in the communities where we work. In fact, building and nurturing relationships is at the core of our work because we understand it’s a critical component to achieving what we’ve set out to do – bring health in reach for all Coloradans.

When we say we want to get to know you, your organization and your work better, we mean it. And we’re out in community enough that you shouldn’t be surprised to see us.

We are interested in gaining a full view of your community, what people care about and need, your vision of what is possible, etc. Without your knowledge, experience and creativity, we cannot solve the issues people in your community

face every day. I believe that the people “on the ground” know the most, and so getting to know you is the only way I can effectively do my job. It’s also the thing I enjoy the most about my work.

Don’t think of me as a traditional program officer doing transactional grantmaking. We see our relationships with organizations – and the people who breathe life into them – as much more than transactional. Grants are just one piece of what is ideally a much longer relationship that we co-develop across time. Most of our relationships will involve funding at some point and no funding at another point, and some of our strongest relationships are with organizations that have experienced both “yes” and “no” responses for their grant applications. Sometimes we will see ways that our work aligns and opportunities for us to actively partner; other times we can help each other by making connections and brainstorming together.

The bottom line is that there will be “no’s,” “yes’s” and spaces in between.

Our goal in spending time in your community is to learn, build relationships and make the best decisions possible so that we support the work most likely to make positive change. Over time, we are reaching new levels of trust with the people we are working on these tough issues with. This trust leads to honesty, an ease of connection and the ability to chat about progress without the nervousness of a once-a-year visit. The Foundation is here to invest in ideas that help communities become healthier on their own terms, without preconceived notions as to what that looks like.

We see our work with you as a collaboration towards achieving a shared vision of healthy, vibrant communities across the state that are abundant with affordable housing, fresh food, safe neighborhoods and more. And there are a variety of different avenues we can take to get there. Sometimes the best way we can support is to provide funding, but not always. Instead, it can mean we come in as

listeners, connectors, coordinators or mediators.

We want to work with you to figure out what makes sense for the given situation; we aren't the experts on your community – you are.

At the end of the day, saying "no" is and will always be the worst part of my job, and it's also the riskiest component of my relationships out in community. It's important to us at the Foundation to foster relationships strong enough to withstand declinations. Saying "no" is not a judgment about whether the work is important, or if an organization should be doing it. My team is making a decision about what we're focused on right now, given our limited resources, and trying to find efforts that fit within that focus.

Turning down a proposal is not the end of the conversation; often it's the beginning of real conversation.

I strive for people to see me as a partner in mission, where constructive conversations are front and center, and a few philosophies become shared ones:

1. **Mutual communication will help us better understand each other's views.**
2. **Many different options are on the table and we're open to exploring ways we can best partner; this will vary by community.**
3. **It's top-of-mind that we are working towards the same things.**

Throughout the relationship, we want to explore the space around the "yes" and the "no" – because we see how much opportunity exists there in service of our mission and the people of Colorado. And that "big black box" of the funding world? We want to replace it with an open door and a face-to-face "hello," using our resources—from grant funding to convening and beyond—to help create healthy homes, neighborhoods and communities in every corner of the state.

TYPE

Blog

POST DATE

Feb 19, 2020

BY

Rose Green