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ORIGINAL THINKING AND CREATING IDEAS

Community foundations are well positioned to take the initiative in grantmaking. To do so, the foundation staff is called upon to come up with ideas. There are specific things which can help community foundation staff members be more creative.

Convening - Community foundations are unique in that they are not political, not in competition with anyone, and they have no axe to grind. As such, they can readily bring people together who do not normally come together.

The ideal size of a group is eight people. To select eight outstanding professionals for a two hour private lunch and ask them for example, "How can the foundation dollar be more helpful with regard to young women?" is to open yourself to all sorts of new ideas.

Creativity is Contagious - Sometimes called "brainstorming" getting together with others in an informal setting with a skilled facilitator almost always brings new ideas to the table.

Moments of Repose - It is vital that people give themselves 'time out'. For many people, this is seen as impossible because of their work load. The price one pays for not being able to think alone is to become static.

Willingness to Risk - A new idea is just that - it hasn't been tried before. This means there is a risk that it might not work. Nothing can stifle creativity more than the fear of failure.

Risk takes many forms. Creative people run the risk of looking foolish. They put themselves out there to be judged. It is interesting that the most severe critic as well as biggest fan of your work is yourself.

Move Around - A full day behind a computer screen is enough to put anyone to sleep. Get up, take a walk, do something to oxygenate yourself.

Stay Away From Problems - When you wait for a problem you have put yourself in a reactionary mode versus creative stance. Original thinking represents an initiative process, not a reactionary response.

When a foundation asks the applicant “What’s the problem?” usually the applicant will paint a bleak picture, even depict a crisis, in an effort to fortify the request for money. Money doesn’t solve a crisis and the giving process is vitiated from the start.

What Is An Idea? - An idea comes about from asking “What is it you want to have happen and how do you want to bring it about?” Ideas are the commodity of exchange for foundations and they are far more exciting and productive than to be ‘problem’ oriented.

Stay Positive - A positive stance is far more productive in creating ideas than a negative one. Hold off if you are feeling negative. Try hard to get others in a positive stance - this is part of the contagious nature of creativity.

Dream - Allow yourself to dream. It is an unconscious way of planning. Dreaming takes you out of the practical mode and lets you be free to come up with ideas.

What If - Try to stay away from ‘what ifing’. ‘What if’ is a way of turning off the creative spigot. For example, if we do that, what if a million people apply; what if we run out of money; what if we can’t make it work; etc.

Get Others to Help You - Ask newspaper reporters to bring to your attention some of the interesting things they come across. This is a new set of antennae which stimulates your thinking and gives you new ideas.

- Don’t think what is impossible. Think how to make things possible.
- Be limitless in your initial thinking and then bring in the parameters.
- Don’t judge yourself prematurely.

Be Curious - Creative people stay away from the status quo. They are constantly looking around, asking questions, wondering about things.

FACILITATING A MEETING

Professional facilitators can charge thousands of dollars for a meeting. Some facilitators are virtual artists in their depictions of a meeting on butcher paper which is taped to the meeting room walls. Some facilitators hire a recorder who gives an outline of the meeting with miniatures of all the butcher paper depictions. There is a large array from which to choose in hiring meeting facilitators. But why hire someone when you can do the job yourself?

Facilitating a meeting should be one of the skills of community foundation staff members. Ideally, the facilitator is the person who is neutral and objective.

Community foundation are uniquely positioned to convene people - usually in small groups. Certain assumptions and practices apply to such meetings:

- If it is a meeting at a meal time, have good food. People appreciate it and are more prone to come again.
- Use private rooms. Stay away from restaurants or public settings where there are interruptions.
- Group sizes go from eight persons for intimacy to sixteen persons for a concentrated discussion. Over sixteen, the discussion is harder for give and take.
- Use the meeting as a getaway for participants. Everyone turns off their cellular telephones.
- Give people plenty of breaks. You will find they talk to each other in a spirited fashion during the break and afterwards they are more ready to listen.
- If the meeting is more than one day, start the evening before with an informal get together. People need to be heard before they can listen and this get together is their chance to talk to each other and be heard.
- As facilitator, memorize everyone's first name and refer to people by name. Have everyone introduce themselves. If you want an ice breaker ask people when they give their name to state something about themselves not on their resume.
- Never allow a put down where one person says to another "That's a dumb idea," or similar remark. This kills participation. Your skill in restarting the discussion is important "Nothing is dumb here, let's hear what you have to say."
- Make sure everyone participates. This means you will need to call on people "How do you feel about that?" or "Do you agree?"
- Do not let one person dominate. If necessary, interject yourself and say we need to hear from others.
- Pay attention to the comfort level. Is there a glare from the windows? Is there water and food in the room (not candy). Are the chairs comfortable? Is the room the right temperature? Seat people so they can all see each other's eyes.
- As facilitator, stay alert to the discussion, to people's body language, to yourself. You are in charge and the success of the meeting is in your hands.

Caution: If you want to be part of the group discussion, don't act as facilitator. Have someone else do it.

ORIGINAL THINKING & CREATIVITY RETREATS

If you wish to hold a staff retreat on the subject of original thinking and creativity, call Bill Somerville at 510 645-1890 for more information.

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The Grantmaking Consulting Program offers three services:

- Three-day on-site visits with extensive review of foundation procedures, extended individual sessions with the foundationboard, grants committee, and staff.
- Two-day training sessions for program officers (5 or more persons).
- Facilitating board retreats.
- Staff/Board retreats on creative programs.