

Grassroots Philanthropy: Field Notes of a Maverick Grantmaker
Bill Somerville, with Fred Setterberg
Heydey Books, 2008

Grassroots Philanthropy is a terrific read. It took me back to my early days running small grassroots organizations, with their double helix of excitement about “changing the world” at the grassroots level and the difficulty of finding funds to do so.

Using compelling storytelling and clear, direct language, Bill Somerville, with Fred Setterberg, has crafted an indispensable resource for community grantmakers working at the grassroots level. In *Grassroots Philanthropy*, Somerville draws on his more than 30 years of grant-making experience to lay out a comprehensive plan for funders to adopt simple, action-oriented practices that fund a community’s most vital work—without waiting in the office for complicated, paper-laden grant applications to arrive.

Somerville, who heads the San Francisco Bay Area’s Philanthropic Ventures Foundation (PVF), persuasively argues that funders need to leave their offices, hit the streets, locate and build relationships with people and organizations doing vital grassroots-level work outside the spotlight, and provide “immediate response grants” through “paperless giving,” to quickly support this work. He acknowledges that this practice is not without risk, and that his numerous successes have been tempered by occasional failures. The failures, however, can serve as important learning experiences when they are acknowledged and discussed. He writes:

Imagine if foundation staff could consult an annual Big Book of Failure—a compendium of the pitfalls embedded in various grantmaking Strategies. Think of the time, energy, and money we would all save if we could become acquainted with the devil residing in the details of our colleagues’ best-laid plans.

The principles *Grassroots Philanthropy* lays out are supported by numerous stories of the people and organizations PVF has funded over the years, which I found to be one of the most compelling parts of this book. They demonstrate again and again the big differences even small amounts of money can make when funders are guided by intuition as well as analysis, and a willingness to take risks. “Put the venture back in venture philanthropy,” Somerville advises.

Grassroots Philanthropy ends with an Epilogue of “Seven Immodest Proposals to Make Philanthropy More Effective, Exciting, and Fun.” This list concisely summarizes the book’s action-plan for effective community-based grant-making:

- Get out of the office and into the field at least 30 percent of the time.
- Pare back the paper to a slim stack.
- Speed up your response time.
- Empower the executive to make grants without board approval.
- Establish a venture fund for riskier grants.

- Fund outstanding individuals engaged in important work.
- Link large foundations with smaller community foundations to pursue grassroots grantmaking.
- AND—make sure your work remains exciting, inspired, and fun.

Sure sounds like a good plan to me..

Grassroots Philanthropy's chapters include:

- Chapter 1. Philanthropy's Untapped Potential
- Chapter 2. One Man's Route to Philanthropy
- Chapter 3. Getting Started
- Chapter 4. The Search for Outstanding People
- Chapter 5. Grantmaking with Speed and Grace
- Chapter 6. The Joys of Risk
- Chapter 7. The Trouble with Problems and the Glory of Ideas
- Chapter 8. Philanthropy as Action
- Epilogue: Seven Immodest Proposals