

TIP SHEET

10 Ways Grantmakers Can Avoid Mission Creep During a Crisis

“Philanthropy doesn’t end at five o’clock for me. It’s a 24/7 calling.” Beth Broomall, grants coordinator at [Charles H. Dater Foundation](#), shared this sentiment during a recent webinar on managing your mission during a crisis. It probably rings true for most funders.

That dedication to helping the communities you serve makes difficult times—like a global pandemic, record inflation, or devastatingly severe weather—even harder. How do you help everyone who needs it while staying true to your grantmaking organization’s core values?

In our conversation with two veteran grantmakers—Beth and Lisa Tacker from the [Two Ten Footwear Foundation](#)—they shared what they’ve learned from managing a variety of crises and how they’ve prepared their organization to weather whatever comes next.

Before A Crisis

1

Review your mission statement every day.

This simple step keeps your mission from becoming just a line on your website. Remind yourself each day of the “why” behind every decision you make as a grantmaker. When the next crisis hits, you will have this mission front of mind.

2

Know your average grantee.

Dig into your grant data to get a good picture of your average grantee. For the Two Ten Footwear Foundation, which provides hardship assistance for anyone in the footwear industry, they found their average grantee was a single mother of color working in retail. Knowing this enabled the organization to look for new ways to help this demographic.

For funders that support nonprofit organizations, it helps to know the size, impact area, reach, and geographic location of your average grantee so you are prepared to focus on them during a crisis.

3

Build trusted partnerships.

Look for organizations in your area that work tangentially with your community. For example, if you work primarily with high-school-aged youth, build or strengthen relationships with funders that focus on work readiness and mental health. Not only does this help you get a better picture of what is affecting your community, but now you have additional pathways for organizations needing different forms of support.

Building trusted partnerships also extends to your grantees. Find ways to build stronger relationships with organizations you fund, from using ad dollars to promote their programs to finding ways to support them non-monetarily. This trust will make them feel comfortable coming to you when crisis strikes and let you know exactly what they are facing.

When a Crisis Happens

4

Don't panic.

Resist the urge to try to do everything at once. You make the best decisions when you understand exactly what is happening and what your organizations need from you. This also helps you avoid taking on projects that are outside of your mission, even if your community needs it. If the overarching task seems insurmountable, work backward from what your organizations truly need from you and focus on the next step.

Recognize that this will be a stressful time for everyone so make efforts to take care of yourself and your team. This will be a difficult time for everyone on your staff and the staff members of your grantees. Give everyone a little grace and recognize when you or a team member needs a break.

5

Communicate and collaborate.

During a crisis, you can't overcommunicate. Meet with stakeholders regularly—possibly daily—to plan the next steps. In addition to keeping your leadership up to date, share what you are doing with your peers. If they've been through a similar situation, they might have suggestions. If they haven't, they will want to follow along for reference.

It's also important to keep grantees in the loop as much as possible. They need to know if funding is coming and when, if you are doing any emergency grantmaking, and if anything is expected of them. Also, find ways to open communication channels so those trusted grantees can share what they are experiencing with you, which might change your next steps.

“Don't be afraid of change. No matter what the problem is, someone else has probably had a similar issue and has figured out a way to get through it.”

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—Lisa Tacker, Two Ten Footwear Foundation

6

Keep processes as streamlined as possible.

You've documented your internal controls and tried to make them as intuitive as possible. But when you need to get support to your grantees quickly, you might find your current processes don't work as well. All your internal controls are important, but work with your leadership to identify which ones need to be prioritized to streamline processes. Instead of an extensive report for the Charles H. Dater Foundation's emergency grants during COVID, Beth simply asked recipients one question because most of these grants were being made to previous grant recipients that were well-known to the foundation. The question: "Just tell us how this money helped you serve more clientele."

Also, understand that you might need to get creative. During the pandemic, the postal system was understaffed so Beth delivered some checks by hand to make sure funding arrived quickly. For certain initiatives, perhaps you allow voting by email instead of in person. The key is to be intentional about the changes you make. Don't put your organization at risk out of convenience, but there may be changes you can make that enable you to get important tasks done faster without increasing risk.

7

Lean on your long-standing community relationships.

During the 2008 financial crisis, the Charles H. Dater Foundation saw its endowment shrink significantly, so the foundation leadership opted to refrain from taking on any new grantees. They could support the grantees they had relationships with and still make an impact while they evaluated the situation. When the stock market came back and the endowment was at its previous levels, they were able to take on new organizations.

For the Two Ten Foundation, the pandemic brought a variety of challenges for their grantees. While they are used to helping individuals cover medical bills and rent payments, the mental health toll was heavy for many of its applicants. The foundation was able to work with other organizations to provide those needed resources outside of monetary support.

After a Crisis

8

Review what you learned.

Once the immediate needs of your community are met, resist the urge to go back to the way things were. More than likely, you learned something about your organization, your processes, and your community. Some of those learnings can—and should—be added to your standard operating procedure.

Spend time talking with stakeholders internally and externally to understand what worked and what didn't. Were there hurdles in your procedures that caused unnecessary slowdowns? Were there new communication channels that yielded unexpected benefits? Also, set up a meeting with your leadership and trusted grantees about what you should do differently next time. While the next crisis won't look exactly like the last one, there will be a next crisis.

9

Update your documentation.

Based on what you learn from your meetings with your stakeholders and leadership, update your documentation, including your internal controls policy. Include any new technology that helped you move faster and recognize what held you back so you can find better solutions.

10

Recognize when your mission needs an update.

After a crisis, sometimes you realize that your mission needs an update to better serve your community. After getting clear on their persona and helping so many people during the pandemic, the Two Ten Footwear Foundation realized their mission was missing something important: opportunity. Their mission is now to bring hope and opportunity to the people of footwear. They are engaged in ways to bring real opportunity to enrich the lives of the people who work in the footwear industry through education and upskilling partnerships.

Flexible and intuitive grants management software makes managing a crisis easier by streamlining communication, making applications easy, and putting data at your fingertips. Join us for our next product tour to learn how Blackbaud Grantmaking™ can help simplify your grantmaking, giving you more time to build relationships and make a stronger impact.

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