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Passion -- Not Strategy -- Drives Successful Giving

By H. PETER KAROFF

For years, a choir of philanthropic players, from individual donors and foundations to scholars and watchdog groups, has been singing a similar tune: Philanthropy should have measurable "impact," meaning that grants should produce documented results and certifiable outcomes.

My colleagues and I have contributed to that refrain for well over a decade, praising the benefits of "strategic philanthropy" and trying to put it into practice. But I'll confess that the trend worries me. I am concerned that philanthropy is becoming too formulaic, too linear, too metric -- in other words, that the emphasis on process is stifling creativity and squelching the very kind of social entrepreneurship that new generations of donors and grant makers claim to favor.

Process should be a servant of intuitiveness, values, instincts, and passions -- and not the other way around.

It's not that good analysis and demands for accountability are unimportant. It's just that alone, they don't do the job. Also needed are creativity, curiosity, a willingness to take risks, a vision of possibilities, and a desire to form enduring relationships with grantees -- the "secret sauce" of philanthropy that too often is missing in by-the-book grant making.

Many of the most-successful donors know that it's almost impossible to come up with a formula that will lead to effective giving, and they use their instincts to develop a very effective approach. "Sometimes," one donor told me long ago, "I feel it would do just as much good to drive down to the poorest neighborhood in the city, open up the car window, throw the money out, and drive back home." But he doesn't do that. Instead, he aims his gifts at the "unsung hero," the very poor kid with both feet on the ground, who may be overlooked but who really wants to make it. When the donor visits the children he is trying to help through his philanthropy, he radiates how much he believes in the capacity of each youngster. This is retail philanthropy, a no-baloney kind of deal without an ounce of process fat in it. It works because of the donor's instinct, and his love for these kids, but what they really rise to is his high expectations of them.

I can think of many donors and foundations whose work has borne out my point:

- A donor who wants to see the nation face up to the reality of its growing ethnic, racial, and religious diversity developed his passion for the cause because as a young boy he experienced anti-Semitism firsthand. He went on to lead a company that employed people from more than 50 racial, ethnic, and national groups, and his leadership allowed many different cultures to flourish. His knowledge about diversity is impressive, but what gives his philanthropy an added dimension is his moral compass and intuitive understanding of how critical it is that different groups learn to relate to each other effectively.
- A painter has a passion for the role of the artist in society, and an equally strong belief that art needs to be taught in the public schools. Her fervor led her to develop a program that provides grants of \$5,000 to allow talented art teachers in Massachusetts and Connecticut to spend the summer rejuvenating

themselves as artists. The program, called ART (Art Renewal for Teachers), is a perfect bridge between the donor's experience and intuition, and the societal and educational needs she cares about. One of her insights was that both artists and teachers are isolated in their work. As a result, ART recipients are eligible for an additional \$3,500 grant that allows them to collaborate with teachers in their school on interdisciplinary visual-art projects.

- A counterintuitive investor who has always questioned the status quo in business has entered philanthropy in the same manner. He takes in the analysis and information on the question at hand, and what comes back is always an unconventional interpretation and an original course of action. He hopes to give away \$1.5-billion over the next 15 years, and as a result is looking for projects that can effectively handle \$100-million or more. When he provided support to a major medical research institution, he stimulated the leaders of that institution to jettison the departmental barriers that have traditionally framed medical research and to instead think holistically about their work.

The secret of effective philanthropy is not confined to individual donors, of course. When the Walt Disney Company developed its Disney Learning Partnership program, it drew on the creative resources of the Disney Company to foster innovative teaching approaches and promote success among students.

Disney began by analyzing existing school-improvement efforts, reviewing scholarly literature on education, and searching out examples of creativity in schools. But the spice in Disney's brew was a planning session that included brainstorming exercises with the Disney "imagineers," people who blend creativity and practical knowledge to move the company's dreams to reality. The session produced some remarkably innovative ideas of how to connect the real-time energy of Disney's employees to the classroom and the final product has been a stunning collaborative effort. While the use of a company's personnel as volunteers is nothing new, Disney broke new ground in the level and intensity of that collaboration. In addition, the project has been promoted and celebrated in ways that only Disney knows how to do.

A philanthropy of metrics and matrices is all well and good if it produces results. But my vote is for touch-and-feel grant making, a philanthropy spiked with the mystery ingredients of inspiration and imagination.

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