

# WHEN A CONSULTANT CAN HELP

*by Barbara D. Kibbe*

**A**n important characteristic of most respected — and successful — grantmakers is self-reflection. They plan, they assess, they evaluate, and they communicate. And, sooner or later, many look to outside experts or consultants for help with specific tasks.

When starting your family foundation, an outside expert or consultant might be able to help — but help with what?

### When a Consultant Can be Useful

Typical projects a family foundation might employ a consultant to undertake include:

- **Family Matters.** As families work out relationship issues, they must also develop (or follow) a vision, start the grants process going, and manage foundation's assets. With such a complex array of relationships and responsibilities, a consultant's experience in similar situations — as well as his or her essential neutrality — can break down barriers to consensus and make the business of the family foundation more manageable.
- **Management and Structure.** Family foundations often must deal with internal challenges about grantmaking. A consultant can help sort out family members' roles, the decisionmaking process, and issues of power and money.
- **Needs Assessment.** You may know the mission but not the grantee community. A consultant can define and quantify the needs, research existing programs, identify gaps in the system of services, and make recommendations about where to invest foundation dollars to make the greatest impact.
- **Preparing RFPs and Assessing Proposals.** Your foundation has decided to launch its first new initiative aimed at bringing high-quality science education to middle school children.

If it seems that the best means for selecting an appropriate grantee is by asking for proposals, a consultant might help prepare a Request for Proposal (RFP), draft and help circulate the document, and even help design a proposal review process that helps ensure the best projects are considered for funding.

- **Evaluation.** More and more family foundation boards want to know if the grants they make are effective. The objectivity, as well as the technical expertise, of an outside evaluator can be helpful in setting up an evaluation process.
- **Dissemination and Communication.** A communications consultant can help a founder and family talk through a communications strategy.

### Locating the Right Consultant

In many ways, finding a qualified consultant is more difficult than finding a doctor. At least with physicians you have a reasonable assurance that anyone who has graduated from a bona fide medical school and has a license to practice medicine has studied — and hopefully learned — something about how to safeguard and improve peoples' health. Physicians are often certified in specialties. Consultants have no required course of study, no certification, no continuing education requirements, not even a required apprenticeship.

Usually, the best way to identify good consultants is to network with colleagues from other foundations. Even with a strong

recommendation, however, it is imperative to interview more than one consultant. Some useful questions to ask consultant candidates might include:

- Whom have you worked for in the past, and what did you accomplish for them?
- Have you ever consulted on the same issue that our foundation now faces?
- What led you to consulting as a career?
- What is your work process? How would you work with our board and family members?

If the consultant seems promising after the personal interview, follow up by checking references. Ask for a client list, not the consultant's handpicked batch of satisfied customers.

Look for three main qualities in a consultant — *skill*, *sensitivity*, and *experience*. Direct your inquiry to determine whether your candidates possess them.

Good choices are usually the result of clarity about the aims and limitations of the consulting process, combined with agreeable personal chemistry between the consultant and client. So, give equal time to gut feelings and to matching the skills of the consultant with the project and the precise needs of your family and foundation.

### What to Expect from Consultants

Once the consultant has been selected, the amount of care taken in defining the assignment can mean the difference between a successful endeavor and one that goes awry. One way to ensure that the relationship and work product stay on track is to have the consultant prepare a workplan for the foundation project manager review.

The agreed-on Scope of Work serves as a blueprint for the consulting process. It should spell out both the problems to be addressed and the goals of the collaboration,

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## Traits of a Good Consultant

Because of the immense variation in the consulting role and lack of licensing or other widely accepted standards of qualification, specifying precise, objective standards of competence is difficult. Although no two consultants work in exactly the same way, all capable professionals will demonstrate three essential qualities.

**SKILL** > Most consultants develop specialties — such as meeting facilitation and planning, assessment and evaluation, or board development and staff training. They keep up with developments in the field by studying the new literature, staying in touch with colleagues, and reexamining their own theories, biases, and experience. Their professional credibility is based on their consistent ability to perform at an exceptionally high level in the areas they have embraced as their own.

**SENSITIVITY** > Consulting is very often group work, including families. Some consultants relish the complexity of family behavior. They anticipate the problems that inevitably crop up during any kind of collective endeavor. And they know how to harness the energy of the family, without turning the process into a therapy session or allowing it to disintegrate.

**EXPERIENCE** > Good consultants have track records. They won't be using your project as a highly paid internship to learn the fundamentals of grantmaker management. Your foundation's goals and problems will neither surprise nor confound the seasoned consultant.

roundly sketching activities that will be pursued over a defined period.

The consultant should be provided with basic information about the foundation and the family before being asked to prepare this workplan. Some foundations actually disseminate an RFP as a means for locating consultants interested in working on their project or problem. Such an RFP should offer information about the organization, as well as background on the project or problem the consultant is being asked to address. It also can be quite specific about the kind of written response the foundation expects — e.g., qualifications, experience with similar projects and organizations, proposed workplan, timeline, and budget. Whether the foundation chooses to issue an RFP or simply call a number of consultants for interviews, a detailed workplan should be prepared by the consultant before work commences, and it should be done free of charge. The proposal and workplan should include:

- Statement of the problem to be solved or the objectives to be achieved;
- Approach and methods to be used in reaching the goal;
- Tasks to be undertaken, including details of each step;
- Personnel responsible for accomplishing the tasks;
- Costs for the entire project, broken down into logical categories; and
- A timeline showing key milestones.

### Evaluating a Consultant's Work Product

A successful collaboration with a consultant depends on determining whether expected goals have been met. Thus,

goals must be carefully established from the beginning. It is sometimes difficult to evaluate fully the performance of even the best consultants. Try to keep the following in mind:

- Evaluation is a continuing process. Quality must be tracked from the beginning of the consulting relationship, with sufficient opportunities for adjusting the process if it runs off course. The consultant should be available to discuss progress during regularly scheduled meetings or on an ad hoc basis.
- Interim reports are necessary. Any project that lasts more than 8 weeks probably requires a brief, written progress report by the midway point. That report can serve as the basis for a more detailed discussion with the consultant during which you make certain that everybody involved is holding up his or her end of the job. (i.e., it shouldn't significantly increase the cost of services). It is an informal document, serving as an indicator of the project's general health, making explicit much of what you've probably already seen or intuited, and ensuring that the overall focus remains steady. The report will not cap or complete discussion on the project but rather open it up.

Remember, nothing turns out as planned. The consulting process usually produces both delightful new information and unwelcome revelations. As a result, some changes in strategy may be necessary. Still, it is important to resist the temptation to respond to each layer of discovery with a new policy or revised workplan. Hold steady until the whole picture emerges.

SOURCE: Adapted from Barbara D. Kibbe, "Working with Consultants," *Resources for Family Philanthropy: Finding the Best People, Advice, and Support*. Washington, DC: National Center for Family Philanthropy, 1999. An additional source is Barbara Kibbe and Fred Setterberg, *Succeeding with Consultants*. Washington, DC: The Foundation Center, 1992.