

# Change Up Your Questions



**PEAK  
2026**

**SPECIAL**  
**Handout/Resource**

**“Real World” examples**

# For You

1. Use these various examples of real-world situations as conversation starters for your team.
2. They can be used at a staff meeting, a board meeting, or in conversations with program officers.
3. These are designed to get you thinking and talking!

# What would you do? Developing useful questions

- ▶ You want to learn how an organization plans its programs, or makes decisions regarding programs or services.

Which question might you use?

- A. *“Please describe your Theory of Change and how it impacts the overall structure of your programmatic decisions and measurement of outcomes.”*
- B. *“Do you use any sort of framework or set of guidelines when you make decisions about your program? Tell us about those.”*
- C. *“How does your organization decide whether or not it should undertake a particular program?”*
- D. Something else.

# What would you do? Keeping the playing field level

- ▶ You're reviewing an application for renewed funding. A trustee says, *"I heard that the organization just won an award as a "Best Place to Work" in our area. Let's go ahead and renew their funding."*
- ▶ There's no mention of this in their application nor is there a question in the application that asks about this. It hasn't come up in discussions regarding other applicants.

## What would you do?

- A. Don't worry about it, it's a renewal application anyway.
- B. This has happened before, consider creating a question that allows applicants to share stories of recent awards/accolades.
- C. Suggest a future policy -- If it's not in the application materials (or wasn't raised during a conversation with a program officer) it shouldn't get considered.
- D. Something else.

# What would you do? An actual question from a grant application

▶ *Does this project or program address any of our funding priorities? If so, please share details here. (Optional)*

This is the exact wording of the question in the application.

What would you do?

- A. Leave it but make it a required response.
- B. Delete the question entirely (The nonprofit should have researched the priorities and not submitted a proposal if it didn't align.)
- C. Change the question: *“Share how this program or program aligns with one or more of our funding priorities.”*
- D. Something else.

# What would you do? An actual set of questions from a real grant application

- ▶ *Briefly describe the proposed program, how it relates to the organization's mission, capacity to carry out the program and who will benefit from the program.*
- ▶ *Explain the significance of the program and why the organization is qualified to carry it out.*
- ▶ *Describe the expected outcomes and the indicators of those outcomes.*
- ▶ *Document the size and characteristics of the population to be served by the program.*
- ▶ *Outline the strategy and timeline to be used in the development and implementation of the program.*
- ▶ *What is the plan to involve the population you intend to serve in the design of the program?*
- ▶ *How does this program enhance the existing services in the community?*
- ▶ *Project evaluation - describe results expected by end of the funding period as well as the evaluation process you will use to assess it. Describe also the criteria for success.*

## What would you do?

- A. Review the questions; see if some can be combined/simplified.
- B. Leave the questions, these are important topics.
- C. Identify whether some can be more easily covered through conversations with the organization during the process; remove them from this list.
- D. Some sort of combination of A and C.
- E. Something else.

This is the exact wording of the question in the application. There were several other sections each with their own questions.

# What would you do? An actual question from a grant application

- ▶ *What are the potential impacts of this project? Approximately how many people will this program or project impact?*

This is the exact wording of the question in the application.

What would you do?

- A. Leave it, it seems fine.
- B. Take out “how many people,” leave the first part.
- C. Change the second part, “*Tell us about the people who will be impacted by this program or project.*”
- D. Something else.

# What do you think?

## Creating questions that “explore”

- ▶ You want to explore how an organization approaches learning, overcoming challenges, building effectively on successes, or sharing knowledge

Here are possible questions you could ask.  
What do you think?

- “Tell us about your history in sustaining new initiatives.”*
- “In the past, when something hasn’t gone according to plan, how have you approached and learned from the situation?”*
- “How will you share the impact of this project? Do you anticipate specific outputs such as reports, briefings, or blog posts? How might this work impact the wider field in which you operate?”*

# What do you think?

## Creating questions that “explore”

- ▶ You want to support organizations that have a good sense of their place in the ecosystem and understand how their work compares with other organizations

Here are possible questions. What do you think?

- A. *“What other nonprofits operate in your ecosystem? How does your approach compare to other organizations?”*
- B. *“Distinguish yourselves!”*
- C. *“Has your organization explored collaborating with another nonprofit who serves the same community?”*
- D. *“Why are you the right organization to address this problem? And why are we the right funder to support that work?”*

# What do you think?

## Creating questions that “explore”

- ▶ You are eager to collaborate with grantees that are open to innovative solutions or who are committed to advancing learning in their field.

Here are possible questions. What do you think?

- A. *“If your program is successful, what might other nonprofits in your field or community learn from your example or approach?”*
- B. *“What unconventional approaches are you exploring that might address [this issue] in a completely different way?”*
- C. *“In a few years’ time, if we support your work/project, what would we each be celebrating? What stories would we be sharing about our relationship?”*



Hope these are  
useful for you!

Have these examples sparked  
your creativity? Or concern?

# Resources and Articles

- ▶ “Practical Tools to Help Grantmakers Put Learning First” by Ben Liadsky and Andrew Taylor, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy blog post, April 19, 2022.  
<https://johnsoncenter.org/blog/practical-tools-to-help-grantmakers-put-learning-first/>
- ▶ “Values-Based Communication - How Leading With Values Can Power Your Organization” by Jessie Landerman and Steven Lawrence, TCC Group Briefing Paper, July 2023.  
<https://www.tccgrp.com/resource/vbc/>
- ▶ Trust-Based Philanthropy’s “TBP-Aligned Resources” - a listing of more than a dozen guides, articles, and workbooks created by foundations, national organizations, and more.  
<https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/tbp-aligned-resources-1>
- ▶ “Great Funder-Nonprofit Relationships Toolkit” Exponent Philanthropy resource.  
<https://exponentphilanthropy.org/publication/great-funder-nonprofit-relationships-toolkit/>

# Resources and Articles

- ▶ “A More Beautiful Question - The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas” (10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition) by Warren Berger. Bloomsbury Publications 2024. [\(Available in hard cover, paperback, and audiobook format\)](#)
- ▶ Case Study - Siegel Family Endowment’s Inquiry-Driven Grantmaking on the [DATA4Philanthropy website](#). [Direct link to the case study](#).
  - ▶ Watch for a new white paper focused on “inquiry-based philanthropy” from the [Siegel Family Endowment](#), coming out this spring
- ▶ The Right Question Institute - A Catalyst for Microdemocracy, Cambridge, MA <https://rightquestion.org/>
- ▶ [“Writing for Busy Readers” by Todd Rogers and Jessica Lasky-Fink](#)

# KEEP IN TOUCH!



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