

Change Up Your Questions

Exploring and Shaping What You Ask Grantees and How You Ask Them

**PEAK
2026**



**PEAK 2026 Online Convening
April 22, 2026**

Agenda

1. Reinforce the important role that questions have in the grantmaking process
2. Understand ways you can review and adjust questions based on changing times, evolutions in the sector, and your needs as a funder
3. Encourage you to incorporate routine reflection into your work, make sure questions are supporting the process and doing so in an equitable manner
4. Consider possible approaches by looking at real-world examples of questions from actual grant applications



Today's Presenters

▶ Marshall Ginn

- ▶ Principal, Capital Philanthropy
- ▶ 35+ years in the field of nonprofit management and philanthropy
- ▶ Program Advisor, FM Kirby Foundation's Innovation Engine Grant Program



▶ Jessica Plummer, MBA

- ▶ Program Manager, Larimer County Behavioral Health Services
- ▶ Regional funder with 13+ years in the grantmaking and grant management field, specializing in start-up initiatives
- ▶ Invested in Community Wellbeing in Northern Colorado

Quick Poll - Who's With Us Today?

- ▶ Foundation leadership (Exec. Dir, Pres., CEO)
- ▶ Grants Management and/or Grants Administration
- ▶ Program Officer
- ▶ Learning/Evaluation Department or Team
- ▶ Board Member or Trustee
- ▶ Consultant/Advisor
- ▶ Grant Writer
- ▶ Other

The Importance of Questions

Asking the right questions is central to building a more just and equitable democracy. We must strengthen people's ability to ask questions and participate in decisions that affect them. When people of all ages learn to ask the right questions, it leads to feeling a new sense of agency, confidence, and power.

Adapted from the mission of the **Right Question Institute**



The Importance of Questions

- ▶ At the 2024 Community Foundation of Northern Virginia’s annual *Shape of the Region* event, keynote speaker and noted author **David Brooks** spoke of the “quality of our questions.”
 - ▶ “Ask big questions that provide big answers.” Make people feel seen, heard, and respected.
 - ▶ Be a good question asker! Get people to tell stories.
 - ▶ Instead of “What do you believe in?” he asks, “How did you come to believe that?”
 - ▶ “If we met a year from now, what would we be celebrating?”
 - ▶ “Tell me about a time you were seen?”

**How might you adapt these for your situation?
What might these look like if used in a
grant application?**

Questions Are a Funder's Tools

APPLICATIONS & CONVERSATIONS

- ▶ They are integral components of your application, the conversations you have grantees, and your internal deliberations
- ▶ It's important to focus attention here

RELEVANCE IS KEY

- ▶ Ongoing shifts in the sector, the community, and philanthropy require you to assess the impact of those changes on the questions you ask and how you ask them
- ▶ It's important to be current

QUESTIONS CAN BE HARD TO UNDERSTAND

- ▶ Many who create grant applications are surprised to learn how difficult it can be for nonprofits to understand and respond to questions
- ▶ It's important to be clear

Questions Should Reflect Values and Priorities & Respect the Values and Priorities of Others

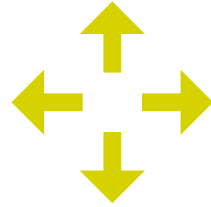
- ▶ **Could someone tell** - just by reading your application - what your values are as a funder? Your strategic or funding priorities?
- ▶ **Have you intentionally focused on your values** as a funder? Your priorities? Have you explored how you articulate those in your materials?
- ▶ **Understand different views and perceptions** - Everyone will not make the connection, even if you think you've been clear about your values, they might need additional context; challenge your assumptions
- ▶ **Different backgrounds and languages** - Applicants may have various levels of educational experience, knowledge, language facility, or perspective; responding to questions filled with jargon or highly technical phrases may present a significant challenge

What does “Change Up Your Questions” mean?



Add elements or dimensions

Clarify what you want to know or encourage more precise responses



Make small changes

Tweak the language a little or edit the questions into a simpler format



Rewrite the whole thing

A question gets you the info you need, but it feels outdated or inconsistent with the times - start from scratch and rewrite it



Take it out

Cover it during a conversation instead of the application. Streamline your process!

Note: Do be mindful of how these changes might affect your grants management system, such as the application portal or reporting systems, etc.

Using Questions Effectively - If you ask for it - Use it!

TRIM OUT “RELIC” OR LEGACY QUESTIONS

- ▶ “*We’ve always asked that*” type of questions can linger on an application, long after you stopped using that information

EFFICIENCY IS THE GOAL

- ▶ Gather information you need to make a funding decision; anything else potentially clogs up your process, making extra work for nonprofits
- ▶ They are likely answering versions of the very same questions for other funders

YOU CAN ALWAYS GO BACK

- ▶ If you find something is missing, and it’s hindering the decision-making process, you can always go back to the nonprofit and inquire further

Using Questions Effectively - What are you actually trying to find out?

Are you looking at “Technical” factors - deadlines met, impact data provided, etc.

- ▶ If it’s important to the process (or your board) track it; don’t guess.
- ▶ Compile critical elements into a “cover sheet” and attach it to review summaries.

Are you trying learn about “Idealistic” factors - a nonprofit’s approach to involving their constituents, supporting or training staff, their engagement of the board or volunteers?

Check your assumptions - Do you know how or why the question was originally developed?

Using Questions Effectively - Use curiosity to explore more complex topics or issues

- ▶ Are there characteristics which are critical for your partners to have?
- ▶ How does an organization pivot if things don't go as planned? Or how does it leverage opportunities?
- ▶ Does the organization have its own set of values? Are they similar to or in alignment with your values?
- ▶ Do your “best” or “favorite” partners share common traits? Can you ask questions that get at those traits?

Think of the responses that a question focusing on one of these issues might produce, and what would you learn from those responses?

Framework:

Is this important to us as a funder?

Is this a critical factor?

Will discussions about this issue or topic be central to our decision-making process? Does it meet our needs for information, inspiration, knowledge?

Do we ask a question?

Is there a specific question about this topic in the application? Or is this explored by staff and clearly recorded?

Is this used for all?

Is this question asked of, or is this topic explored with, ALL applicants, both new and renewals?

Framework:

Have we taken a good look at it?

Is this question or topic new?

Have we considered the many ways it could be received or interpreted by a nonprofit? (Again, challenge your assumptions.)

What about interpretation?

Are we prepared to assist a nonprofit who might interpret this question differently than anticipated?

What will we learn?

Are we ready to evaluate the responses to this new question over time to assess its impact on our decision-making? Will we seek feedback from applicants and reviewers?

Learn As You Go

- ▶ This is a cycle of reviewing, changing, listening, adjusting, and listening some more
- ▶ Build this into your ongoing workflow - use dashboards and other data to monitor it
- ▶ Create a custom form and send a survey to reviewers (or applicants)
- ▶ Promote curiosity and sustained learning as organizational priorities

Implement & Monitor

Try making a change then monitor (and track) the impact it makes

Take the Time & Be Intentional

Be intentional about reviewing the responses to new/edited questions to see if there are any surprises

Ask for & Respond to Feedback

Use grantee engagement to explore the impact of new questions

Check In

At the end of review meetings, ask yourself, “Did we have what we needed to make good decisions about our giving?”

Questions? Thoughts?

Before moving on to look at two case studies, as well as some real-world examples, what do you think?

Use the “Raise Your Hand” function OR make a comment in the chat, and we’ll acknowledge you and ask you to come off of mute.

Learning in Action - Case Study



[Larimer County Behavioral Health Services](#)

[Applicant Resources](#)

Building in a retrospective process that supports all aspects of your grantmaking.

- ▶ Three main surveys each year: Applicants, Reviewers, and Staff
- ▶ Survey results are shared with our advisory boards
- ▶ This feedback helps inform the changes we make each cycle - including application changes and technical support

Application Analysis: Two examples of incremental changes over time

- ▶ Populations of Focus and Geographic Reach
- ▶ Health Equity

Learning in Action - Case Study



Application Analysis: Geography

Over the years, the geographic reach requirements shifted from a broad, general prompt to a dedicated question emphasizing rural outreach:

- ▶ **2021 and 2022 (General Request):** Geographic reach was embedded into the broader "Populations of Focus" question.
- ▶ **2023 (Expanded Scope):** The application maintained the general request but explicitly clarified that both direct and indirect service providers needed to describe the geographic reach of their benefitting populations.
- ▶ **2024 and 2025 (Dedicated Rural Focus):** The application introduced a standalone "GEOGRAPHIC REACH" section. It now explicitly lists target rural areas and towns that applicants should consider.

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Application Analysis: Health Equity

Over the years, the health equity requirements in the application evolved from an optional, general prompt into a highly specific mandatory question:

- ▶ **2021 (Optional):** The question was initially optional and only applied if a program was specifically intending to reach "underserved and/or minority populations".
- ▶ **2022 & 2023 (Mandatory for Direct Services):** The wording was updated to ask how the program would provide "effective, equitable, understandable, and respectful" care tailored to the specific needs of the populations being reached.
- ▶ **2024 & 2025 (Highly Specific and Strategic):** Introduced a dedicated "HEALTH EQUITY" section that asks applicants how their program will remove barriers and improve access to care

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Consider Using **Headers and Formatting** to Help Applicants Quickly Understand What You're Asking

Examples:

- ▶ **GEOGRAPHIC REACH:** Briefly share the intended geographic reach of your program/project. Include any specific outreach to areas outside Fort Collins & Loveland (i.e. Estes Park, Wellington, Timnath, Red Feather Lakes, Laporte, Berthoud, Windsor, or Johnstown)
- ▶ **HEALTH EQUITY:** How does your program/project remove barriers and improve access to behavioral health care?

[“Writing for Busy Readers” by Todd Rogers and Jessica Lasky-Fink](#)

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Consider the order of your questions. Thoughtful sequencing helps applicants share a clear, compelling narrative—not just fill out a form.

Guide applicants from the **why (problem)** → to the **how (plan)** → to the **impact**

- ▶ Start with the “why.”
- ▶ Move from big picture to details.
- ▶ Build a logical flow.
- ▶ Avoid jumping between topics.
- ▶ End with reflection or impact.

A good test: Could someone read the answers straight through and understand the program without additional context?

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LCBHS Application Changes Happening in 2026

- ▶ AI question being added to the grant application (see below)
- ▶ New guidance on our [evaluation webpage](#)

***Did you use generative AI tools (like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, or others) to assist in drafting this proposal?**

If so, please briefly describe how it was used (e.g., brainstorming, proofreading, or drafting specific sections) and the steps you took to ensure the information is accurate and reflects your organization's unique voice.

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LCBHS Application Changes Happening in 2026

- ▶ New Synergy Fund Application:
 - ▶ Work backwards. Think from the end, not the beginning.

Pre-Award → (Application Question)

Pre-Award Evaluation → (Scoring Rubric)

Post-Award Final Reporting → (Final Report Question)

Post Award Final Report Evaluation/Closeout (Scoring Rubric)

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- ▶ **The Innovation Engine Grant Program** - a new initiative of the F.M. Kirby Foundation in Morristown, NJ
- ▶ Grant application created from scratch
 - ▶ Questions needed to be distinct from typical “tell us about your program” application questions
 - ▶ A goal was to learn about the organization’s “mindset” regarding innovation, managing risk, experimenting, etc.
 - ▶ We wanted to provide guidance on the type of information we wished to see, but we did not want to tell them what to say, nor give them a “check list” to follow



[Innovation Engine Grant Program Website](#)

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How was this program designed or developed? What gives you confidence that this program will work as you envision?

Elements that you could include in your response are:

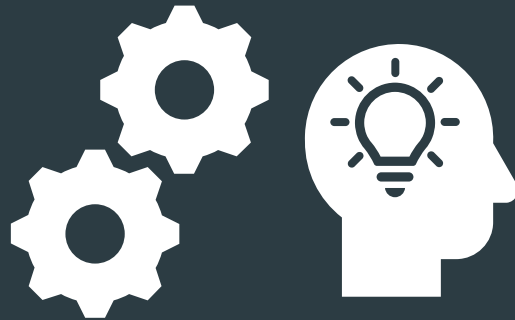
- The role research, data, or community input played in shaping the program
- How the program might be adapting successful practices from other fields
- A description of the design process or the steps that were taken to develop the program
- A general description of how you plan to implement or roll out the new program
- Tests or “experiments” you might plan to use to test your intended approach



**INNOVATION ENGINE
GRANT PROGRAM**

Now let's look at several real-world examples

We might not get to all of these, but you can take a look at these later and prompt some interesting conversations in your own foundation



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?

- A. *“Tell us about your history in sustaining new initiatives.”*
- B. *“In the past, when something hasn’t gone according to plan, how have you approached and learned from the situation?”*
- C. *“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?”*



Thoughts or comments?

Have these examples sparked your creativity? Or concern?

Use the “Raise Your Hand” function OR make a comment in the chat, and we’ll acknowledge you and ask you to come off of mute.

Recap

- ▶ Questions are critical tools and they should reflect your values and be used thoughtfully
- ▶ “Changing” a question can mean several things
- ▶ Use your questions effectively
 - ▶ If you ask it, use it
 - ▶ Focus on critical factors
 - ▶ Exploring
- ▶ Frameworks - Is this important? Have we taken a good look?
- ▶ Learning and curiosity as ongoing values
 - ▶ Seek and respond to feedback
 - ▶ Challenge your assumptions



Your Charge



- ▶ Use something you heard today to become more curious and to adjust your grantmaking, even small moves can make a big difference
- ▶ Share something you heard today with a colleague, a trustee, friend, your dog ... Anyone! Just don't keep it to yourself
- ▶ Post your thoughts on a blog or social media, keep the conversation going
- ▶ Leverage the time you've spent today by considering how you might change up your own questions

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” (10th 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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