

Language Matters

support



INTRODUCTION

The positional power of philanthropy means that our words often carry more weight and have a broader reach than we realize. This gives philanthropy an opportunity to elevate the voices of leaders and members of the communities it aims to serve. There is also the danger that choosing words without care will lead to unintended consequences or create harm.

A passing comment may encourage a grant recipient to re-envision a program. A poorly chosen word could reinforce a biased narrative or unfair cultural stereotypes. Having strategies in place to examine language and choose words with intention can move your mission forward in powerful ways.

This guide contains helpful tips for staff members or trustees of foundations to examine and strengthen language use when interacting with colleagues, grant partners and community members. Language is a powerful tool to be honed and refined. Reference this guide for actionable examples, activities and resources to build your communication skills today.



GIVE FEEDBACK JUDICIOUSLY, GATHER FEEDBACK FREQUENTLY

A COMMON STORY

Program Officer Sue is on a site visit to a youth development organization. She meets with the Executive Director, Sally, and the Program Director, Julie, for about an hour. During the conversation, Sally notices that all the volunteer leaders are college students and enthusiastically suggests that the program considers engaging high school seniors as well.

Her foundation is interested in supporting high school students in developing leadership skills. “You should really add high school volunteers as well, it would broaden your impact and is closely aligned with our funding priorities,” Sue remarks with excitement.

Julie is over-taxed as the only program staff member, but the organization is afraid to risk losing grant monies from a core funder, so they work this idea into an upcoming grant request. They receive the funds but do not have additional resources to bring on new staff. Julie tries to manage both internship programs but quickly experiences burn out in this role.

Most veteran grantmakers will know a similar story from colleagues. Stories of advice can be taken too literally or go wrong when implemented by a nonprofit. Because of the power dynamic inherent to philanthropy and the artificial divide between grantmakers and nonprofits, the onus is on foundation staff to communicate clearly and ensure casual suggestions are not seen as demands.

Even with clear communication, advice from a funder to a nonprofit will often be considered carefully and rejected with caution. Because foundations make funding decisions about nonprofits, it can be difficult for nonprofits to be honest with foundations without assuming risk. Language matters and the right words and tone can help build reciprocal trust. Well-phrased questions are very helpful. In the above story, instead of telling Julie to add high school mentors, the program officer could have articulated her thoughts as the following questions: "Have you considered adding high school mentors as well? How would that impact your ability to run other programs?" Instead of coming across as a dictate, this leaves room for a broader conversation about impact and staff capacity.



Tone makes a difference in interpretation. One way to check-in on how your communications land is to collect anonymous feedback from your grant partners. Feedback can cover everything from the language on your website or grant application to the effectiveness of your funding approach (and how it is communicated). For broad feedback and in-depth feedback there are many existing independent tools, including the Grantee Perception Report offered by the Center for Effective Philanthropy.

Quick Tip

If you don't have the financial resources to dedicate to an independent perception survey, consider creating a free Survey Monkey or Google Forms survey instead. You can send them out after site visits, proposal development meetings, or grant cycles. Or you could always add a section for anonymous feedback on your website itself. To avoid overwhelming nonprofits, make these optional, anonymous and concise. Sample questions might include: "Did foundation staff communicate clearly and promptly?" or "What is your perception of the foundation's mission and priorities?"

Exploration Task

Set aside a few minutes after your next conversation with a grant partner and write down answers to the following questions. What words did I say most often? Did I say anything I regret? If so, why? What tone did my words set at the beginning and end of the conversation? Make this a common habit after meetings with grant partners to help identify your common language patterns.

Summary

- Gather anonymous feedback whenever possible
- Establish a routine for self-reflection around language choice
- Give advice with care; express trust and curiosity in your communications

Resources

Le, Vu. "GrantAdvisor.org, a site for reviewing foundations, and why all the cool people are using it", *Nonprofit AF*, 28 Aug. 2017.

Setterberg, Fred, Colburn S. Wilbur, Barbara D. Kibbe, Rushworth M. Kidder, and Jan Masaoka. "Conducting Site Visits and Interviews: A Guide for Program Officers." *The Complete Guide to Grantmaking Basics: A Field Guide for Funders*. (Funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation). Arlington, VA: Council on Foundations, 2008.



SHARE POWER, TRULY

Foundations have a broad platform of influence and the message and language they choose is noticed, especially by others in the nonprofit community. A grantmaker's word choices can be powerful or disempowering in their descriptions of individuals or communities. Similarly, the language you pick in your interactions with nonprofit staff members not only helps set the tone for those relationships but sometimes for the sector itself.

All too often the common labels used in philanthropy are disenfranchising. From "disadvantaged" to "underprivileged" and "needy," the buzzwords of the sector paint a dire portrait of individuals "without" power. Frequent examples include "downtrodden", "without advantage", "lacking privilege", "deprived", "destitute" or "vulnerable". Each of these words connotes a link between poverty and weakness or helplessness.

While it may be unintentional, such labels diminish the other attributes and strengths of individuals and overemphasize poverty as a defining character trait. Making poverty a character trait, subtly places the blame on the individual for living in poverty while failing to acknowledge the structural conditions that lead to the conditions of poverty.

Putting these labels at the forefront also builds a narrative of victims and heroes to evoke reader sympathy. In this false paradigm, who are the heroes coming to the rescue? Nonprofits and most especially donors and funders.

COMPARING NARRATIVES

Consider the different ways these short descriptions capture the attention of donors and create a call to action on behalf of a young woman named Mary.

Example A: Mary, an impoverished young woman is looking for a hand-up not a hand-out. She can't afford textbooks and needs your help today to finish business school.

Example B: Mary is attending college and works tirelessly for her dreams of becoming a business owner. She has the fortitude and talent to succeed. A donation today will help cover the cost of textbooks for the semester.

In the first example, the fact that Mary lives in poverty is used to draw attention, encourage pity and induce giving. In contrast, in the second example other attributes such as Mary's personal goals and work ethic are uplifted. Both present a call to action for donors to help cover the cost of education, but the second example celebrates Mary's powerful attributes while the first plays off the fact that she lives in poverty to manipulate emotions.

Do you receive proposals that look more like the first example? If so, does any of your current language diminish the power of the people you are hoping to help? Nonprofits often mirror the language of grantmakers and changing narratives begins with individual reflection and receptivity to feedback.

Quick Tip

Ask 2- 3 trusted grant partners for their input on very specific areas of language you are looking to make more powerful. Keep the conversation brief and come prepared with specific exploratory questions.

Is any of your language unclear? What message is communicated about the communities or individuals? What trends, negative or positive, do they notice around language used to describe these issues or populations?

Exploration Task

Look through your most recent RFP or Annual Report. Write down the most common adjectives used to describe programmatic areas, grant partners and populations served.

Now explore the following questions: Do these common word chosen closely align with your values? What identities were mentioned most frequently? Could these word choices be disenfranchising in any way?

SUMMARY

- Notice the way your words put certain identities to the forefront
- Question narratives that establish heroes and victims
- Provide and seek feedback on disenfranchising language both internally and with partners

RESOURCE

Otzelbreger, Agnes. "On pity and politeness, or why charities need a communications rethink." *Meaning*. 21 Nov, 2017. <https://medium.com/meaning-conference/on-pity-and-politeness-or-why-charities-need-a-communications-rethink-2310c01d77cc>

LOOK FOR BLIND SPOTS

As a function of human psychology, unconscious perceptions influence our decisions. For philanthropic leaders in positions of power, it is essential to remain vigilant to blind spots and cognizant of the way personal identities influence perceptions and therefore hidden biases.

Unconscious bias often shows up in the words we use to describe communities or groups different from those we identify with such as differences related to race, gender, sexuality, or myriad others. When we are unaware of our biases, our language choice may reinforce cultural stereotypes, including but not limited to unconscious racial and gender-based prejudices.

The good news is that we can also turn to our language as an important clue in uncovering our blind spots. To begin understanding the impact of your language on other groups (and making positive changes), start with a tool from British social change facilitator and researcher, Agnes Otzelberger. She shares:

"You replace the subject/object of your phrase (e.g. 'women' in 'women's empowerment' [or 'youth' in 'capacity building'] with any other grouping of humans (gender, ethnicity, religious or other; it's often particularly revealing when you substitute for a religious group, or the antithesis of your subject, in this case 'men'). When the result sounds ridiculous, or feels weird, or wrong, you probably shouldn't be using it. It should be possible to say what you're saying about any human being, or else you're probably saying something dehumanising or patronising."

Creating a more inclusive, respectful, and effective communications strategy begins with understanding yourself. Otzelberger's tool is just one of many available resources to exploring bias in language.

Quick Tip

Another way to avoid offensive labels, is to ask for individual preferences. Ask nonprofits why they use certain descriptive adjectives. Did they ask any of their clients and key stakeholders when making those decisions? If not, why not? Talk to people who are impacted by your work or represent the communities in question to understand the impact of your words (and get their perspective on preferences).

Exploration Task

Set a timer for thirty seconds. Press go and write down as many words as you can that come to mind when you think of the communities your funding primarily supports. Don't censor just write automatically:

Now explore these questions

- Are these words largely positive, negative or neutral?
- Were there any words you did not want to write down?
- Were they any surprises? Or anything that feels like it's missing?
- Would you talk about your own or other communities using the same tone?

Summary

- Unconscious bias can impact our words and choices
- Examine the ways bias may be influencing your decisions and your language
- Ask for input and permission when describing communities that are not your own

Resources

McKeon, Debbie. "Language Matters." Council of Michigan Foundations, 13 May, 2015, www.michiganfoundations.org/news/language-matters

Lentfer, Jennifer. "Two ideas to retire." *How Matters*, 15 Mar., 2018, www.how-matters.org/2018/03/15/two-ideas-to-retire-empowerment-capacity-building/



CONCLUSION

Language can send messages loudly that you are not intending. Unfortunately, many of the words used by philanthropy reinforce stigmas related to poverty and other conditions of life. Selecting words with more intention will enhance your work and your work relationships. Strive to use and support language that builds and shares power rather than diminishing it.

Choosing the “right” words is an ongoing learning journey. Fortunately, there are many tools and resources within the sector to help examine the ways hidden bias affects our work. Continuing to seek out feedback and personal development in this area is an important step to finding words that matter the most in the moment. It is important not only for individual success but for organizations and the sector at large.



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1-866-502-1944

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