

Best Practice Versus Innovation

The nonprofit community is rife with idealists cooking up audacious solutions to stubborn problems. It's a Petri dish, bubbling with notions that just might work. Grants can be a powerful mechanism for supporting innovation, but finding grant support for new, experimental approaches isn't easy.

The allure of best practices, proven approaches, research-based approaches, and the like is understandable. Funders want their dollars to produce results, after all. But if grantmakers limit their investments to proven approaches, how will

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Grantmakers must:

- **be open to innovation**
- **be willing to take risks**

nonprofits develop promising innovations, find keys to unlock closed doors, and move the field forward?

Like most conundrums, the solution is to strike a balance, and grantseekers and funders will have to walk the tightrope together. Nonprofits must be experts in their field, know when new approaches are required, and offer up good ideas. Grantmakers must be willing to take reasonable, well-considered risks. Both must honor the good that exists while also moving forward into the promise of what could be.

When working to bring a new idea to life, assess the situation thoroughly. You can't ignore proven approaches. Instead, consider how the new option fits within those approaches, or fills a hole in them, or builds on them. Do some research to see if others have tried something similar and whether it was successful. Connect with those innovators to learn about their work and tell them what you have in mind. Collaborate.

Once you have your concepts and information organized, bring the idea to top administrators in your organization and explain why it has value. Get a green light for action, then reach out to people and orga-

nizations who should care about what you're doing. Engage them and build momentum for the work.

Whenever possible, take the new approach out for a test drive. There may be a low-resource way to try out the idea. Perhaps it's a good fit for one of your organization's current programs and can be integrated into that work. Keep detailed notes on implementation, challenges, successes, and outcomes. Promising data from small-scale pilots can be powerful in convincing grantmakers to partner with you to expand the test to a larger scale.

Since you want to engage grantmakers as partners in the new undertaking, start by telling them what you envision and why it's important. Some funders may join you in the endeavor by making grants, some may introduce you to other grantmakers, and some will simply appreciate being informed.

To innovate effectively, understand the field and how the new approach fits within what has already been proven to work. Lay a solid foundation of community support. Be clear in your understanding of the need for the fresh approach and relentless in your advocacy to bring it to life.