

Inside Philanthropy

Never a Proposal: How Herb Sandler Gave Nonprofits the Support They Needed Most

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The progressive movement lost one of its best funders last week. Herb Sandler died on June 5, at age 87. He and his wife Marion, who passed away in 2012, created a foundation that swims against the worst tendencies of social justice philanthropy. We can expect that Herb and Marion's children Susan and Jim, Steve Daetz and the small staff at the foundation

will continue their legacy of unorthodox, high-leverage, low-drama grantmaking.

But Herb's passing is a good moment to explain why Sandler grant dollars have been worth so much to their recipients and add fuel to the ever-so-slow shift toward long-term general operating support that they've helped inspire among their peers.

Here's how it works:

No proposals

In the decade that the Sandlers have funded my organization, they never once asked for a proposal. No paperwork to fill files and cover butts. Instead, before they made a decision to fund us, they did an organizational review. They interviewed two dozen people who work in and around our field to understand our reputation, role and potential for growth. They had us come in for a day to walk through our thinking and plans, and asked to see our internal planning and financial documents.

No paperwork

They've always discouraged us from sending over reports or other documents that look like they've been written just for them. They want to see the paper we're actually using to set our goals and plan out our work, and they want us to stay focused on that work.

Do what you do, not what we say

When we do give them paper, they read it closely. One of the things I've loved about our annual visits to the Sandler Foundation offices in San Francisco is seeing that Herb had read one of our documents and filled it from top to bottom with highlights, comments and questions.

Don't get defensive: The conversations are tough, but come from a place of intellectual curiosity and a belief in excellence. Foundation personnel push you on the choices you're making; ask whether you're doing too much, not too little; whether what you're saying would make sense to someone on the street; what trends you're seeing. They don't ask whether your plans conform to the foundation's five-year plan or if you have a slide deck with a killer logic model.

No projects

Never have they asked us to do anything specific with their money. No tedious negotiation over project design, goals, objectives and activities. Yes, they want to hear about our plans, but then they trust us to incorporate their tough questions as we see fit. They invest in organizations they believe can be effective. They provide a steady flow of resources each year.

No chasing funding fads and other shiny objects. No treating grantees like vendors who can help the foundation to polish its reputation or a program officer to advance their career. No request to change course to adapt to a hot idea or skip a year of funding while the foundation goes through a strategic planning process. They're interested in whether we're building the organizational infrastructure we need to support our mission and growth.

Networks matter

Over the past two decades, the Sandler's have invested tens of millions of dollars helping national organizations like Faith in Action and the Center on Budget Policy and Priorities to build strong networks of state affiliates that reach across the U.S. They've understood that lasting change in American society comes from networks that are able to reach deeply into local communities while working together to influence state and federal policy and politics.

Co-partners

One of the most valuable parts of the Sandler experience for grantees is the consistent, patient help in opening up new funding opportunities and strategic relationships. Much of their funding to us has been structured as matching grants designed to encourage new funders to invest in our work, and existing funders to increase and improve their support. They've consistently, and with good effect, pushed our other funders to go upstream, to move away from funding specific campaigns and short-term projects.

Funders are idiosyncratic about who they fund, but how they fund can be just as important. While the Sandler Foundation supports some of the most effective organizations working for racial and economic justice in the U.S., its approach to philanthropy more closely resembles the conservative donors who've patiently invested in the development of institutions that have shifted the course of American politics over the past 40 years.

The ingredients of the Sandler way are simple—patient, long-term general operating support designed to build organizations, networks with deep roots in local communities, and ecosystems of organizations that complement each other. Next time you read an article or book that bemoans the contrast between progressive and conservative philanthropy, remember the Sandlers and know there is a better way—and it's within reach.

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