

Enabling Trust-Based Practices

4 Tips for Grants Management Systems

February 27, 2023

Introduction

Enabling trust-based philanthropy asks us to continue from values to implementation. This guide provides specific suggestions for a key element of trust-based structures: **The grants management system**. Whether you are a product designer or a foundation staff member evaluating platforms, this guide is designed to provide a set of concrete features, integrations, and accessibility standards that you can use to advance your trust-based operations.

WHAT IS TRUST-BASED PHILANTHROPY?

With a core set of values rooted in advancing equity, shifting power, and building mutually accountable relationships, trust-based philanthropy seeks to demonstrate humility and collaboration in what we do and how we show up in all aspects of our work as grantmakers. Trust-based values function as a north star across four key dimensions of a grantmaking organization’s work: culture, structures, leadership, and practices.

Learn more at <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/overview>

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide is a companion to “[Grantmaking Operations with a Trust-Based Lens](#)” and was written by the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG) in partnership with the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. Specifically, this guide focuses on **practices** and **structures**, offering concrete ways that the grants management system, as a core element of a grantmaker’s technology ecosystem, can advance the values of trust-based philanthropy in four areas:

1. Support Listening
2. Create Accessibility
3. Promote Collaboration
4. Set Trust-Based Practices by Default

Read on for concrete functionality tips in each area as well as reflections from practitioners in philanthropy.

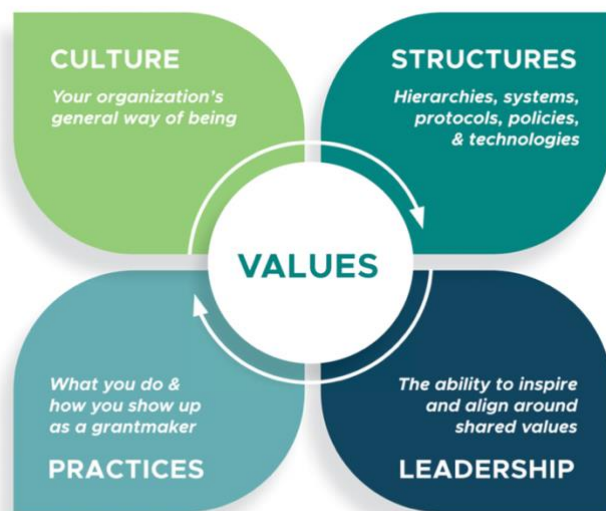


Figure 1: 4 key dimensions integral to trust-based practices

Support Listening

Centering relationships is a value of Trust-Based Philanthropy, and **listening** is core to prioritizing healthy, open, honest relationships. Listening doesn't need to mean holding a focus group or adding another meeting to the calendar of busy nonprofits. And yet this is often what a well-meaning program officer will do when a deeper relationship is desired. Product providers can help.

To equip the practice of soliciting and acting on feedback, product providers are encouraged to ensure your platform gathers data about the nonprofit experience in low-friction ways (i.e., little to no extra activity required by the end user). This can help grantmakers measure how they're doing in their practice to enable a streamlined experience. Listening is a core component of centering grantmaking operations on the nonprofit experience.

“Being able to identify actionable steps based on direct feedback from grantees is crucial to any grantmaking process that is grounded in trust-based philanthropy. It's encouraging to see the increasing number of platforms that support this functionality.”

- Bonnie Look
Associate Director of Strategic Operations
Rogers Family Foundation

FUNCTIONALITY IDEAS

- Ensure basic CRM functionality (Ease of documenting and reviewing “customer” interactions, including in-person meetings, phone or Zoom check-ins, and email correspondence) is available in your platform or via integration with a standalone CRM.
- Build continuous feedback loops into your platform such as micro-surveys or satisfaction ratings at multiple points throughout the grantmaking process in addition to (or replacing?) the traditional method of a single survey after the completion of the grant.
- Provide the ability to ask questions, leave comments, and track responses at the field level for a grant application and/or report.
- Track “time to complete” for core tasks such as completing an application, submitting financial requests, completing a grant report, and more. Make this data available to both nonprofits and grantmakers, ensuring the latter have access to monitor completion times across their entire portfolio (through a dashboard, or by exporting to PowerBI or Tableau). Include the ability to segment completion data with other nonprofit characteristics so that funders can understand better whether certain groups of nonprofits are seeing unusually long completion rates and can intervene to help.
- Implement release management best practices for ongoing customer feedback loops and regular, well-communicated platform updates.

LEARN MORE

- OpEd: [Listening vs. Transformation: Is Philanthropy Changing in the Ways Nonprofits Need Most?](#)
- Webinar with W.K. Kellogg Foundation: [Beyond Focus Groups Towards Sustained Feedback Models](#)

Create Accessibility

Technology platforms are a key element of operationalizing trust-based principles and values. This places a special responsibility on the shoulders of grants management system providers when “the heart of trust-based philanthropy is [described as] aligning your practices with your organization’s values.” At the same time, this responsibility is a unique opportunity for product providers to lead the way in improving accessibility for systems used in philanthropy.

As noted in the “Equity Essentials for Philanthropy Tech” series by the Technology Association of Grantmakers (TAG), accessibility is an equity imperative. If grants management systems are not accessible by a screen-reader or do not meet [WCAG guidelines](#), equitable access to funding is at risk. Technology is far too often an invisible loophole in a grantmaker’s equity work, so product providers are invited to take the lead in closing the gap. Consider adding accessibility functionality to your product roadmap.

FUNCTIONALITY IDEAS

- Address [the top issues from “Fix the Form” by GrantAdvisor](#):
 - Enable applicants to download the full grant application beforehand.
 - Allow “save and return” for grant applications.
 - Avoid character limits for fields.
 - Enable text formatting (e.g., bullets, underlining, bold).
 - Add “other” options for multiple choice questions.
 - Ensure contact information is provided throughout the application process.
- Ensure your system meets [WCAG 2.1 guidelines](#).
- Test your system with screen readers and address gaps.
- Enable full access via mobile devices.
- Enable multi-language capabilities for ESL organizations, including ensuring fields can accept non-Latin characters.
- Consider open-ended approaches to gathering names that allow people to express their identity fully.
- Enable the upload and inclusion of audio and video files as an alternative to text.

“Inclusion must be an intentional component in our decision-making. We need to collectively decide that accessibility is an imperative, not just a nice-to-have. Our digital systems need to be easy to navigate (without using a mouse) and rich with alt-text and captions to make it easier to see – and hear – content.”

- Kim Foster
Consultant to Philanthropy and certified participant in TAG’s “Equity Essentials for Philanthropy Tech” program

LEARN MORE

- [W3C Accessibility Guidelines \(WCAG\) 3.0 Working Draft](#)
- [Fix the Form](#): An Initiative by GrantAdvisor.org
- [Equity Essentials for Philanthropy Tech](#): A Program with the Technology Association of Grantmakers

Promote Collaboration

Many trust-based grantmakers adopt a collaborative approach to grant applications and even funds allocation as part of the practice of being [transparent and responsive](#) and [decentralizing decision-making structures](#). For example, the Magic Cabinet foundation shared in a 2021 webinar with the Technology Association of Grantmakers, that their grantmaking process includes nonprofits deciding amongst themselves (through a facilitated process) how to allocate funding and to whom.

Does your platform enable collaboration and bi-directional input? Below are some ideas.

FUNCTIONALITY IDEAS

- Enable the option to invite guest reviewers for input (e.g., comments, edits, etc.) on a grant application.
- Enable grant applicants and grantees to invite multiple contributors to a grant application or report.
- Allow nonprofits to “opt in” to sharing their applications and/or information with other funders who use the same grants management system. This improves data reuse but might also aid in “discoverability” of new nonprofits.
- Create a means for collaborative and/or cohort-based application and grant report submission.
- Create a means for collaboration and workflow to facilitate participatory grantmaking.

In a nutshell, ensure your workflows and user roles are customizable and enable a wide variety of internal and external collaborators at multiple points in your system, or through easy integration with another collaboration platform. Think outside of the box in creating new functionality that leverages the ecosystem of grantmakers in your system to aid nonprofits.

LEARN MORE

- [Magic Cabinet: Promoting Capacity Building through Participatory, Trust Based Philanthropy](#)
- [Magic Cabinet: Our Nonprofit Engagement Process](#)

“Magic Cabinet highly values grantee expertise and decision-making. The Foundation creates systems and structures that enable grantees to approve each other’s grants and to determine other aspects of their relationship with the Foundation.”

- Magic Cabinet Findings Brief, Prepared by Public Profit, May 2020

Set Trust-Based Practices by Default

One of the most powerful ways that a grants management platform can support trust-based practices is to make it easy, **by default**. Setting these practices by default not only encourages funders to re-examine why they may need increased complexity, for example, but it also sets a standard for the entire sector.

FUNCTIONALITY IDEAS

Suggested default settings or functionality:

- Ensure that **unrestricted grants** are enabled by default.
- Ensure that **multi-year grants** are enabled by default or easily enabled.
- Provide a **basic, streamlined application** that simplifies the grant application process to a core set of required fields.
- Offer NTS codes and SDG outcomes as default indicators.
- Leverage APIs to auto-populate with publicly available data on nonprofits from sources such as Candid or Charity Navigator. For example, ease the burden on nonprofits by integrating with the Demographics via Candid API (free) so that demographic data entered once at Candid by nonprofits is readily available to all funders on your platform.
- Store durable information (e.g., EIN or address) on an organization **at the organization level**.
- Allow nonprofits to auto-populate application or reporting responses from answers provided previously in your system for another funder.
- Within a single grant, auto-populate data already provided during application later when reporting or renewing.
- Allow funders to pre-populate application or reporting responses from information they have gathered through means outside of the system, e.g., meetings, emails, publicly available information.

“A good GMS leverages its functionality to favor the grant applicant. It offers ways to reduce redundancies and save time in the grantmaking process, so that nonprofits can focus on what matters most - their mission.”

**- Jamie Carroll, Grants & Data Manager
Roots & Wings Foundation**

LEARN MORE

- [Demographics via Candid](#)
- [Candid APIs](#)
- [Charity Navigator API](#)
- [ProPublica Open 990 API](#)

Trust-Based Philanthropy Resources

The TAG Community is rich with lessons learned and reflections on the journey to operationalize trust-based philanthropy. Below are resources shared in an open call for TAG members who are product providers, consultants, and advisors to philanthropy.

FROM PRODUCT PROVIDERS

Blackbaud

- [How to Evaluate Your Organization Through a Transparency Lens](#)
- [Six Ways Grantmakers Can Embrace Transparency to Foster Stronger Relationships](#)
- [Grantmaking: What's Participation Got to Do with It?](#)
- [Participatory Grantmaking: I'm in. Now What?](#)
- [Overcoming the Four Common Challenges of Participatory Grantmaking](#)

GivingData

- [How Grantmakers are Putting Trust-Based Philanthropy into Action](#)

Fluxx

- [Will Trust-Based Philanthropy Solve the Funder to Nonprofit Power Imbalance?](#)

Foundant

- [Building Trust with Grantee Partners](#)
- [Building Resilience through Trust Based Philanthropy](#)

Submittable

- [Choosing a Grant Management Software to Support Trust-Based Philanthropy](#)
- [Trust-Based and Data-Driven Grantmaking: How to Find the Right Balance](#)

SmartSimple

- [Embracing Trust-Based Philanthropy: 5 Key Features Grantmakers Are Employing Today](#)

FROM CONSULTANTS, ADVISORS, AND SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

- [Grantmaking Operations with a Trust-Based Lens](#) by Trust-Based Philanthropy Project
- [Form Design for Trust-Based Philanthropy](#) by Grantbook
- [Leveraging System Features to Support Trust-Based Philanthropy](#) by 1892
- [Championing Trust-Based Philanthropy Through Our Impact-Driven Cohort Program](#) by UpMetrics
- [How to Turn Trust-Based Philanthropy from an Idea into a Viable Approach](#) by PEAK Grantmaking.
- [Breaking the Binary: Your Grantmaking can be Trust-Based and Data-Driven](#) by PEAK Grantmaking.
- [Participatory Grantmaking](#) by Hyphen8

Credits

This guide was written by the [Technology Association of Grantmakers \(TAG\)](#) as a companion to “[Grantmaking Operations with a Trust-Based Lens](#)” by the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. Examples, editorial review, and insight were provided by:

- Bonnie Look, Associate Director of Strategic Operations, [Rogers Family Foundation](#)
- Jamie Carroll, Grants and Data, [Roots & Wings Foundation](#)
- Nick Hamlin, Director of Data Science and Analytics, and Thomas Rinaldi, Manager, Grant Operations, [GlobalGiving](#)

Ideas and suggestions included here were also generated by interviews conducted by TAG and the Trust-Based Philanthropy Project in January 2022 with grants management system providers including Blackbaud, Foundant, Fluxx, GivingData, JustFund, Salesforce, SmartSimple, and Submittable.

Learn more about trust-based philanthropy at <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/>.