What Is “Success” & How Can It Be Achieved?

Defining Success

The Bridgespan Group

GiveSmart

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What am I seeking to do with my philanthropy, or, what is "success" and how can it be achieved?

Your personal definition of success will provide much-needed focus to you and everyone supporting your work. Broadly speaking, your philanthropic success is a win for society—a change for the better that probably wouldn't have occurred without your effort to bring it about. But specifically? Success might mean bringing a polluted river back to life, or reducing maternal fatalities in a developing country, or sharply decreasing a city's homeless population. You alone must decide.

To make this decision, you will need to learn a lot about the problem you hope to solve. But the process of getting your arms around the issues will likely pull you in two directions: on one side, analysis paralysis, where you can't get past the feeling that talking to one more expert, or reading one more report, will provide the answer. On the other side, failure to assess a situation thoroughly enough will leave you in danger of making snap judgments, which can result in duplicated efforts or, worse, throwing good money after bad.

A working definition of success satisfies three criteria:

- It reflects the values and beliefs of the philanthropist.
- It is bounded enough to help you decide what you will and will not fund: You can actually use it to make tradeoffs and develop a feasible strategy.
- It will allow you to gauge progress—or its absence.

Getting started: Marking off the boundaries for what success means to you

What, then, is the best way to begin? In our experience, a working definition of success satisfies three criteria:

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- It will allow you to gauge progress—or its absence.

To set your personal definition of success, you will need to identify one or more "anchoring points" to your philanthropy. For support in thinking about this, see our resource, "Clarifying Your Aspirations."

The next step is assessing where there is a need you can address. Start by conducting focused research. For instance, say your anchor is lung cancer. To inform a more

specific goal, you could identify the demographic or geographic population hardest hit, and then set a definition of success based on what you have learned about ways to prevent lung cancer for that specific population. Alternately, you could focus more on recovery, and read up on promising diagnosis and treatment protocols. Your personal definition of success could be to increase awareness of the links between smoking and lung cancer for a specific population, or to advocate for the adoption of more effective lung cancer screening protocols. Success against either strategy would save lives, but in completely different ways.

If you care about improving the odds for poor youth to escape the reins of poverty, you could identify where this population has the largest outcome gaps when compared to the general population (for example, education, health, or job placement). You could also work to identify what, if any, program models seem to be making a difference. Success to you may be improving prenatal care to underinsured women or reducing the number of youth in the juvenile justice system—or anywhere in between.

Defining success requires clarifying what you believe, establishing what data is available, and identifying what types of work you, personally, are most excited to do. (Produce an ad campaign? Lobby Congress? Fund an afterschool program or a cutting-edge lab?)

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Keep in mind that your definition of success is important, but not etched in stone. Depending on the progress you make, for example, it might just expand. You could start by focusing your grantmaking within a city and then move to include surrounding communities or an entire state. Or you could begin working to support single, low-income parents and move on to serve all families who are living in poverty. What's important is that you have at least one (and possibly more) anchors that won't change. This process of coupling targeted research with some "non-negotiable" anchors is essential. It will help you, your advisors and, ultimately, your descendants, make the many tough decisions that will inevitably crop up for years to come. Having these guardrails will provide a clear rationale for saying "no" when required, something that could otherwise feel arbitrary and subjective.

What should you be on the lookout for? It's a red flag if your definition of success does not help you limit options. For example, if you opted to create awareness around the causes of lung cancer, you could say no to requests to fund smoking cessation efforts, or to any form of lung cancer treatment. If you remain focused on lung cancer writ large, you are left without a way to narrow your efforts, and your resources may be spread thinly across all efforts with little hope of making a difference.

How to determine the path forward?

Based on what you learn in those initial activities, you will have some ideas about how to realize the success you envision. Ask: Do my ideas about how to have an impact on this issue translate into a feasible strategy?

In the philanthropic field, answering this question is often referred to as articulating a "theory of change." Simply put, a theory of change starts with the change in the world you want to see and works backward to lay out everything you think will need to happen to bring it about. It identifies the key players (including yourself) who will need to be involved, what each of those players will have to do, and why they are likely to behave in the way that you expect.

Ask: Do my ideas about how to have an impact on this issue translate into a feasible strategy?

Making your beliefs and assumptions explicit allows you to identify where you are confident and where the ground is less secure. For example, if your path to success relies heavily on certain legislation being passed, or a drug successfully passing FDA screening, you should identify (as best you can) how likely these events are.

To build some confidence around your assumptions, here are a few questions you can ask as you begin your research and start speaking with experts, practitioners, and even beneficiaries:

- What do you know about the people you are working to help and the places you are working in?
- How do the people you're aiming to serve understand this issue?
- Who else is addressing this issue?
- What is already happening that appears to be working? What doesn't seem to be working, and why?

- What do experts say about why this issue persists?
- What have others tried in the past, and what lessons have they learned?
- Does the field appear to need some specific kind of help? For instance, growing organizations that are succeeding, or launching a number of small-scale experiments.
- How expensive are some of the interventions you are investigating? How broad will your anticipated impact be? How long will your support be required?

As you might expect, this process is not always linear (in fact, it rarely is). You might discover news that forces you to reevaluate your plan.

The more you understand the dynamics of this landscape, the better your chances of developing a workable theory of success. Specifically, you could learn from failures and seek out successes to piggyback on and grow to new locations. You will also probably discover some allies, which is useful as philanthropy is rarely a solo act. You may find detractors—passionate disagreement is common in the social sector. If you find that every expert you consult disagrees with your theory, this doesn't necessarily mean you are wrong. However, the bar for proof of concept is now higher than you anticipated, and you may want to proceed with smaller tests.

Be flexible *and* focused

As you might expect, this process is not always linear (in fact, it rarely is). You might discover news that forces you to reevaluate your plan. For instance, say you care passionately about early education. You identified an exciting program only to learn that another donor was unsuccessful at funding the organization's growth due to the unavailability of qualified staff. To avoid throwing good money after bad, you might initially support staff training programs instead, then progress to funding growth. Even though you changed your "how," you remained laser focused on the "what": helping young kids learn. The idea is to zero in on the change you'll hold yourself accountable for (in this example, ensuring that an organization is prepared for growth) while staying true to the cause that is motivating your actions.

SOURCES USED FOR THIS ARTICLE:

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