

## What Kind of Giver Are You?

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Developing a personal charitable "mission statement" can help you achieve your goals.

Do you consider yourself an organized or disorganized giver? To find out, just answer two questions: Do you make your gifts based primarily on whatever an organization happens to ask you? Or do you make your donations according to a personal charitable "mission statement?"

If you do the latter, you are on your way to being organized, and probably more satisfied with your charitable activities. If you do the former you are . . . well, like most everyone.

All of us have experienced the fleeting satisfaction of writing a check and putting it in the mail or into the hand of a grateful recipient. The glow, however, dims quickly.

What if, instead, you could make that good feeling last for weeks, months or even years? That is the promise of organized giving and the key to successful - and more rewarding - philanthropy.

### Creating your personal mission statement

As simple as it may sound, creating a charitable mission statement is hard work. That is because it forces us to look deep within ourselves to discover what is really important. Although outside advice is always helpful, taking the time to decide for ourselves where our gifts should go, and why, is the first step toward becoming true philanthropists.

I recently had a wonderful donor in his 80's create a substantial, anonymous scholarship to reward exceptional athletes with high character. He was motivated by an unfair event involving racism from his youth, that had remained with him his entire life.

Another donor created a fund to help low income children go to camp. His own camping experiences as a young man helped build the good self-image that has made him into one of the country's top financial advisors today.

While many of life's "missions" grow out of childhood experiences, others can result from illnesses and situations that have befallen our families and friends, or exposure that we have had to a particular cause.

Often, the creation of a philanthropic mission is a process, starting one place and ending elsewhere. Where you end up in that process depends a lot on what you think you can realistically accomplish with your gifts. A well-funded donor colleague began several years ago with the idea of assisting families in poverty in a five-county area and gradually honed his focus to target disadvantaged children under age six in one specific borough.

## **Finding a home**

After defining your mission, you will need to identify a "home" for your charitable activity - a permanent structure to help organize your efforts and carry them forward.

For years, the most popular vehicle for structured philanthropy was the private foundation. Creating and maintaining a private foundation, however, is not for everyone. Private foundations require time and money, and their complex operational requirements can be a disincentive to succeeding generations.

Starting a fund at your local or regional community foundation offers a very cost-effective alternative.

All of the back-room operation of such funds can be handled by the community foundation, including investments, annual reports, annual 990 tax filings, annual audits and charitable licensing if required by your state.

This leaves you free to engage in grantmaking and program development, which is the fun part anyway.

## **Creating your program**

After you have decided on your mission, and created and funded the structure for your philanthropy, it is time begin to fulfill your mission objectives.

Whether your objectives are local, regional, national or international in nature, you basically have three choices: 1) support the work of one or more existing nonprofit agencies; 2) work with a nonprofit to develop a program to address your mission; or 3) create an entirely new agency.

Sometimes the fit is a very simple one. If you want to help children of single-parent families, for example, you might consider Big Brothers/Big Sisters. To address affordable housing, you could turn to Habitat for Humanity.

Other times, the solution is not so easy to find. In fact, you may even have to create your own.

Several years ago, we were approached by a donor who wanted to begin an educational program for low-income students in our county. After reviewing the 400 or so agencies that serve our region, we discovered that none of them dealt with, or would be able to respond to, these particular needs. So we started the program ourselves, as a fund of our community foundation.

Today, "Chester County Futures" serves more than 60 students and is about to send 100 percent of its first graduating class off to college.

Further along the spectrum is one of our board members, a billionaire developer who has a broad social vision and deep charitable conscience. He has founded, and supports, major research efforts into Alzheimer's and other diseases, through his own research centers.

As these examples show, within the field of charity, the opportunities for creative and meaningful endeavor are endless, at whatever level you choose to participate. There is no limit to what you can do. And there are lots of people out there, many within the community foundation field, who are skilled and willing to help you, at little or no cost.

So the next time you sit down to write checks to the usual charities, set some money aside to start growing your own special mission-driven fund. See for yourself what a difference "organized" philanthropy can make.