Speaking in a Funder’s Appreciation Language

By Diane H. Leonard, GPC

Funder relationships are a critical component of a successful grant seeking strategy. That statement by itself is not a new idea, rather it is an agreed upon best practice in grant seeking. That statement is so central to our work as grant professionals that funder relationships are included within the competencies that Grant Professional Certified individuals need to demonstrate in order to receive certification through the Grant Professional Certification Institute. It is also a topic that, as a prior Program Officer for a statewide public foundation, I understand from both sides of the relationship and feel very passionately about supporting my clients to develop.

Before you worry that I am starting down a typical road of grantmaker relationships, let me pause to set the stage. I recently read The 5 Love Languages for Children and thoroughly enjoyed learning about how my daughters are different in their natural languages and how their language also differs from mine. I then continued reading Dr. Chapman’s books on The 5 Love Languages. The basic premise of the books may seem simple: everyone feels loved or appreciated in slightly different ways. However, it is our ability to understand and speak in languages that are different than our own primary language that can be difficult at times. Reading those books, sharing them with my family, and having such rich dialogue led me to pick up The 5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace. I wanted to read the book not only to consider the different languages of appreciation for my team and colleagues, but also to think about how these appreciation languages might be a new way to think about foundations and other grantmakers and their preference for relationship interactions.

So what are the five languages, you ask? And how do they relate to building and maintaining strong funder relationships? I have listed the five languages below in the order that I have found grantmakers prefer to connect with the strongest as their appreciation language for their work and provided examples of how I have seen the languages successfully used in various grantmaker situations.

**Words of Affirmation**

- Going beyond the standard IRS recognition thank you letter by at a minimum writing an additional handwritten note on the formal letter can help grant makers feel more appreciated.
- Writing posts on social media providing updates on the success of a program, tagging your grantmakers, and including a message of sincere gratitude is a great way to express gratitude.
- Writing stories about funded program success and including them in your newsletter, annual report, and website are another way to express your gratitude and provide words of affirmation to the grantmaker.
- Providing a handwritten note from the grantee’s organization leadership or from a program participant letting the grantmaker know what a difference they are making in the lives of those served are always a wonderful option for maintaining relationships.

**Acts of Service**

- Participating in grantmaker-led collaborative groups or committees is a wonderful opportunity, when available, to show your appreciate for a grantmaker and their work by supporting it with hands-on participation.
• Engaging personally or with your colleagues in an activity that directly supports the grantmaker’s mission and work rather than just the funded work for your organization shows your appreciation for their mutual mission.

Receiving Gifts

• Many grantmakers are not able to accept gifts in their roles for the organization. However, having program participants share a finished product of something they have made in a funded program, or create a special art piece as a thank you for the grantmaker is another sincere expression of gratitude that grantmakers are allowed to receive. Framed thank you messages with children’s finger prints making a flower or other creative ideas are often treasured by grantmakers and proudly displayed in offices.

Quality Time

• Making the time to have a face-to-face update meeting with a grantmaker over coffee or lunch is the sharing of your time and your organization’s time and helps the grantmaker understand how important the funding relationship is to you.

Physical Touch

• Having the opportunity to see or experience a funded program in action through site visits helps grantmakers see the impact that their grant dollars have made.
• Having the opportunity to meet and shake hands with your colleagues and the program participants provides grantmakers with a physical connection and understanding of your organization and the work that you do.

I would be curious to hear what other examples you would include from your experiences for each of the five languages as it relates to grantmaker relationships.