

Simple phrases that instantly obliterate your chances of receiving grant funding and how to rephrase them to actually be helpful.

As someone who has been working in philanthropy and managed ‘the funding side’ of the conversation for over 15 years, I’m often asked ‘what’s your favorite project?’ I never answer that question, even though I do have favorites.

The one question people don’t ask is ‘what phrases should I use in my conversations with funders that will instantly obliterate any chances of receiving grant funding?’

I’m so glad you asked. These phrases are for real. They are memorable. And they rarely help advance the cause. Perhaps it might be helpful to reframe these statements and phrases so that they can be a more helpful medium to extend the conversation.

Before we start, it goes without saying that I also empathize with these statements. I have also been in the position of seeking funding from a foundation and feeling like I had to say something unique or clever in order to be competitive or stand out from the others.

It’s a funny dance, this conversation about possible grant dollars. It’s quite simple and generally goes along the lines of any pitch: ‘We have an idea. Do you like it?’

Well to start, let’s acknowledge that these simple phrases may seem quite obvious but every once in a while they slip past the most informed, educated and well-meaning lips. No one is immune. I’ve heard these phrases by individuals with so many acronyms behind their name it looks like someone spilled a box of Alphabet cereal (am I dating myself here?) on their business card. They are not mine, I heard them myself in real time.

So in no order, here they are:

‘we are the only ones doing this’

People like Louis Pasteur or Ketanji Brown Jackson are the type of people who can say ‘I’m the only one doing X.’ Certainly you can also strive for this level of accomplishment but it’s unlikely you’re in the same league as the ‘I’m the first one doing X’ group.

We may have never heard about your idea or your solution, but the likelihood that ‘no one else is doing it’ suggests at best cognitive dissonance or at worst willful ignorance of all the other great work taking place in the universe. Furthermore, it suggests an intent to go it alone and not take the time to leverage relationships with other similar actors. That won’t get you far.

It also points to a lack of research. Maybe in fact you are right, no one else is doing this. And maybe that's for a good reason! Being first to market is not necessarily the best approach. Let someone else be first and learn from their mistakes.

Pivot the phrase to state something like:

'We've been doing our research and talking to other partners but have yet to find something similar to our approach/program. Perhaps you know of a potential partner for us?'

'we will do this regardless of whether or not you fund us'

Intended to show absolute commitment but can easily be interpreted the wrong way. This one is usually stated in a last gasp, desperate effort to make the foundation or funder feel 'left out.' Making someone feel like they are deprived of the opportunity to provide funding is not a good fundraising strategy. There are plenty of other great opportunities out there.

Try the following: 'We're committed to this program and hope to get the funding to support it. If we don't, we'll revisit our thinking and see if there is a way we can adjust our approach to bring in more partners.'

'you wouldn't understand all the reasons and details behind this proposal so just fund us and we'll take care of it'

Usually delivered with a pat on the head. This condescending approach to quelling any and all due diligence questions will quickly shut things down. Some people in philanthropy take their due diligence role very seriously, as should be the case. It's their need (and job) to understand and grasp the details, thus all the questions.

Maybe go with: 'We're happy to continue a dialogue with you. If there are others who may raise questions in addition to the insightful ones you've offered, maybe we can bring them into the conversation to address their points?'

'We don't have any plans for our (insert word) endowment or cash reserves'

The notion that the nonprofit sector needs to do more, do better, save everyone and clean the oceans, all for a minimal cost with an operating expense of less than 10% has been so ingrained into our culture that we often find folks quaking in their boots at the simple question of 'How much cash do you have on hand?'

This question of 'how much cash do you have onhand or do you have an endowment?' can be interpreted many ways. The traditional notion, subtly embedded in the assumption from which produces this angst, is that nonprofits shouldn't have any cash reserves since they are, after all, non-profit. You and I know this is a blatantly untrue statement. How can you operate an effective organization with no cash reserve? How can you plan for the future with no cash reserve? The

assumption is ubiquitous, primarily because of the ‘charity notion’ prevalent among many. (That’s another blog post.)

You should be proud of your cash reserve, ***but have a clear articulated plan for your cash reserve***. Maybe you are saving up to re-pave your office parking lot (true story). Maybe you have a donor who earmarked a substantial donation toward an endowment (which BTW should be minimal of \$1 million in order to make an impact on operations). Maybe you are looking to build a new building. Maybe your program team needs new laptops to replace the Commodore 64 desktops they are currently using.

The reason isn’t the most important element ***but you must have an answer for this question.***

Lastly, don’t shy away from this question. If you have a substantial level of cash reserves, say a six month operating cushion, flout your accomplishment. Brag about your financial planning prowess. Tell stories of your visionary donors who understand the importance of endowment and general operating funding.

Never apologize for having a cash reserve, and **NEVER NEVER NEVER** say you don’t have any plans for it!!!

Pivot to the power statement: ‘We have so many committed donors who have been with us for the long-term that we’re lucky to receive regular gifts to build and sustain our endowment.’