

Opinion

Chet Tchozewski



Intuition, trust, and a great river of money

'Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.'

Albert Einstein

In honour of the recent centennial of Einstein's miracle year, here's a thought experiment: imagine that you've been asked to design a gigantic international grantmaking organization from scratch, billions to get out the door. You want to do it quickly because the sooner the funds are put to work, the sooner we'll see progress. And of course, you want to tackle the world's most important challenges.

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So, how do you design your application form? Are there decent metrics to help you assess grantee progress? And why aren't these the first questions you want to be asking yourself?

My guess is that none of us have gone into this business because we're passionate about processing and evaluating grants, yet these aspects of our work devour an inordinate amount of time and money. Think also of the resources our grantees divert from their real jobs to chase donor prospects and meet the evaluation demands of funders. How much value does all this add?

As long as we're in the realm of a thought experiment, I contend that the ideal system might require no applications, no metrics, just a river of money flowing from philanthropists to where it's needed.

Yes, our work is complex, and it is vital to make good decisions. But I believe we could do just as well if we simply found 50 experienced and creative programme officers

and let them direct that entire river of money without so much as a cover letter or a concept paper.

How would they do it? I believe they would know, intuitively. Their experience would tell them who to talk to, how to evaluate potential solutions and players, and what levels of funding made sense. Yes, they'd make mistakes. Yet the river of money might be twice the size it is today because we would reduce waste at both ends.

At Greengrants, we've had success with a model that uses elements of this idea, most notably with our grantmaking advisers who volunteer their time to identify grantees and help us cut red tape. Since we make very small grants, which can be expensive, a simple, almost handshake system seemed to be a practical shortcut. As I've become increasingly comfortable with our approach, I've come to believe that it needn't be limited to our little niche.

Decisions don't always benefit from more information and deliberation. I believe we are too fond of the idea that we can inoculate against bad decisions by developing more rigorous systems. Even if these systems protect us from the occasional bad grant, I think the cost is far too high.

Recent research on cognition tells us about the limits of conscious thought – its low capacity for handling complex information. In *Blink!*, Malcolm Gladwell's primer on intuition, he cites an experiment in which people solved 30 per cent fewer puzzles when asked to explain their methods, because their intuitive sense was working much better

before their conscious brain intruded.

How can we make the world a better place? This is our puzzle, and it's astonishingly complex. I can't begin to solve it in each of the 120 countries where we've made grants. Our approach is to assign that question to as many people as we can who will help us answer it in the countries where they live and work. It's a system that uses local knowledge, trust and even intuition to cut corners. Do we make mistakes? I certainly hope so. How else can we learn?

And what of the consequences of inaction? How many opportunities will be missed while we're waiting for the latest data?

Intuition often allows us to do things faster, cheaper and better, giving us a survival advantage. When we talk about harnessing intuition, we are also talking about simple common sense. There are some very serious and urgent challenges in the world today. Our survival is clearly at stake, and it strikes me that another log frame analysis might not really move us forward.

So what can we do? Perhaps it's time to trust our instincts a bit more – and the knowledge and experience of our grantees, staff and partners. Here's a thought: trust their strategic vision instead of forcing them to conform to our vision. Look hard at the return on investment of further data gathering and remember what drew us to this enterprise in the first place. Then always, when in doubt, fall back on the wisdom of the many resourceful and energetic people we have gathered together in our cause.