

SAYING YES/SAYING NO TO APPLICANTS

What are some of the better (and worse) ways of saying No to a grant seeker? How about when the answer is Yes?

IN THIS GUIDE

Grant makers spend so much of their time evaluating grants and making decisions that they may not give much thought to decision *giving* – the way they communicate their foundation’s response to grant seekers. Efficiency and etiquette sound like adequate rules of thumb, yet even the most scrupulous grant makers sometimes find that delivering a decision – No or Yes – raises troubling issues. Guide contributors discuss the value of being perfectly clear, with applicants and yourself, about the expectations and conditions that govern the decision-making process and the grant.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Managing grant seekers’ expectations
- The importance of knowing your rationale
- Understanding decision-giving norms at your institution



“I often feel uncomfortable about saying No to applicants. How do I know this proposal isn’t going to work? Am I missing something?”

—Grant maker on lingering doubts about delivering Nos

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A sample from the guide:

Key Lessons From Grant Makers

Saying No

- **Remember the basic rules.** They're obvious, they're basic, but they're often hard to live by consistently. It helps, as a starting point, to manage your decision giving by remaining focused on the four basics: (1) Articulate your goals and guidelines to discourage applications with little chance of approval. (2) Be prompt: Grant seekers are waiting and face huge uncertainty in their work. (3) Explain why you've rejected the proposal, so that grant seekers can make use of your feedback in the future. (4) Be polite – which requires not just manners but sensitivity.
- **Understand your decision rationale.** Three different rationales produce different decision-giving dynamics. A Categorical No – where a proposal doesn't fit the basic guidelines – can be quick and concise. A Policy No – where the grant seeker's interests line up with the grant maker's but its tactics or strategies do not – requires more explanation. A Personal Judgment No – where everything fits but you still have doubts about the grant seeker – requires an even more careful and delicate set of communications. Being clear about the three Nos means the difference between managing your decision giving and muddling through it.
- **Understand and manage grant seeker expectations.** Nos are often disappointing and disruptive to grant seekers because they were so confident of a Yes. Understand how your approach or a given grant situation might have raised expectations – both so you can better explain your reasoning and so you can help control inflated expectations.
- **Understand how your institution shapes decision giving.** Workload, priorities, and institutional cultures can all complicate decision giving. To manage the process better, identify how your institution affects your decision giving work. It can help you cope with your challenges – and maybe even help you spark changes in some of the foundation's practices.

- **Pay attention to your personal identity and professional role.** As for anyone in any line of work, grant makers' personal identities can be at stake in decision giving. Even the most sophisticated people are prone to feel that if they make grant seekers feel bad in rejecting them, then they are the type of person who makes other people feel bad. To avoid having that personal identity, they lapse into evasion and uncertainty. It's more helpful to be personable – but to remember your professional role, which simply includes saying No sometimes.

Saying Yes

- **Make conditions clear right away.** Saying Yes too simply, quickly, or briefly can lead to unpleasant surprises later, when the new grantee discovers that the decision comes with unexpected conditions, negotiations, or limits.
- **State your expectations explicitly.** Grantees like to know how the grant maker will weigh the success of a grant, and how best to demonstrate their progress in meeting the funder's expectations. Too enthusiastic or open-ended a Yes can give the impression that there are no such expectations – an impression that can lead to tensions or frustration later.
- **Be careful when saying 'Yes, but...'** – lest you change an idea so much that the grantee no longer owns it or can no longer work effectively with it. Some give-and-take between applicant and grant maker is natural when a grant is being negotiated, but it's important to remember whose proposal it is.
- **Beware of saying Yes just because it's too hard to say No.** In some situations, grant makers are tempted to make a grant, even just a small one, rather than to say No outright. That can be worthwhile in some circumstances, but often it just raises an applicant's hopes unrealistically. And it can involve grant makers in a relationship that their best judgment was really telling them to avoid.