

# Is Your Good Work Going Unnoticed? Seven Mistakes Foundations and Nonprofits Make (and How to Fix Them)

By Susan G. Parker, Clear Thinking Communications

**F**oundations and nonprofit organizations can take credit for working to improve the human condition on a daily basis. As a leader of one of these organizations, you fund or carry out programs that seek to alleviate suffering and make the world a more fair and just place.

Yet chances are that few people know about your good works. The general public knows little about the difference that foundations and nonprofits make in their lives. Policymakers who you want to influence are often equally unaware of what you do. Even you might be unaware of the good—and not so good—work that you are funding or overseeing.

It makes sense that many people—including you—don't know all of the details of how your programs work. You have busy jobs with a lot of responsibilities. You don't have time to oversee and monitor every aspect of programs that you pay for or administer.

**But when your good works go unnoticed, you and your programs lose out.**

**Unfortunately, foundations and nonprofits make mistakes that make it even more difficult for people to learn about their good works.**

# What Are The Consequences of Keeping Your Good Works Under Wraps?

**For foundations, policy makers don't see you as a player in policy areas that you want to change.** Your money can only go so far. You may hope that the programs you oversee will serve as national models but they can't if no one knows about them.

**For nonprofits, your funders may not grasp the key work you did and so may be unlikely to fund you again.**

What's more, the U.S. Congress and, to some extent, the general public, are calling for **greater accountability and transparency among foundations and nonprofits.** Recent well-publicized scandals among charities and some foundations are making federal policymakers and the general public skeptical of your sector.

**After interviewing more than 40 top officials in the foundation and nonprofit sector, writers of a 2006 report by the Philanthropy Awareness Initiative came to this conclusion:** "The relative insularity of the sector and the apparent belief that 'good works speak for themselves' has left it vulnerable to criticism from policymakers and, furthermore, to being invisible."

## So What To Do?

**It is possible to turn all of this around.** The general public, the media, and policymakers can have a real understanding of the difference that you're making. You can demonstrate the impact and value of your work. Your work can make a lasting difference.

**As a reporter and writer for 25 years, I've covered thousands of stories and written hundreds of reports for foundations and nonprofits.** I'd like to share seven key mistakes I've seen foundations and nonprofit organizations make and talk about simple ways to fix them.

## The Seven Mistakes:

### MISTAKE 1: Keeping It To Yourself

Foundations and nonprofits seem allergic to tooting their own horn.

Foundations grew out of the Judeo-Christian tradition where you didn't talk about your good works—you did them in private. It was frowned upon to call attention to yourself in that way. It was safer and easier to operate below the tree line and work in private.

But that reticence comes with a price. **If foundations and nonprofits don't speak up about their good works, their works will make little impact.**

We are a country in desperate need of solutions to our most intractable social problems. Providing answers that work in the real world is the reason for your organization's existence. So doesn't it make sense to see that the dollars and efforts you've invested go further by making sure that key people know about what you've learned?

**THE SOLUTION:** Toot your own horn. If you have a program that's made a difference in people's lives you owe it to the public and the policymakers to let them know about it.

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### MISTAKE 2: Afraid to Look Dumb

If organizations start to showcase the work they're doing, they open themselves up to critiques. No program is perfect and critics from every spectrum can and might well find something wrong with what you're doing. Your multi-million dollar program that changed some lives, but perhaps did not change the world, could come under scrutiny. People *will* find something to criticize. Who wants to deal with that?

But you also know that no one else has a perfect program either. You are supposed to try things that might not work, to experiment, and to contribute to solve problems in your field.

If you don't get your stories out—your successes and your challenges—you run the risk of not letting people from outside your world comment on and better your work. You risk living in a smaller world where you are surrounded by people who only think like you.

Joel L. Fleishman writes in his book *The Foundation: A Great American Secret* about the consequences of foundation secretiveness.

It takes a strong organization to claim to have some of the answers and to admit that it doesn't have all of them.

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“That secretiveness... has kept the wider nonprofit sector of operating charities from learning how and why foundation initiatives succeeded and failed; and it has contributed to the cocoon-like culture within foundations that allows smugness and arrogance to influence the way foundation officials treat outsiders.”

It doesn't have to be that way.

**THE SOLUTION:** Talk about what worked and what didn't work and be specific. If you fund or run a program that was a failure in your eyes, admit the mistakes. I know that seems a little scary. But as an experienced staff member, you know that you often can learn the most from what didn't work.

For example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is one of the most open foundations in this regard. Each year, it publishes a book, called the *Anthology*, in which outside reporters take a critical look at their programs. Each chapter focuses on a program or series of initiatives that the foundation has undertaken.

Some can be quite blunt about the shortcomings of the programs and RWJF's part in that.

One chapter examined the foundation's program called *Fighting Back* that fought substance abuse through community coalitions. Through the 1990s, the foundation authorized a total of \$88 million for this program, which ended in mid-2003. The program ran into many roadblocks, which the chapter made clear.

The writer, a former investigative reporter for the Los Angeles Times, charted turmoil among the coalitions, fights over the evaluation and questions about the impact of the program.

If you show that you are not afraid to invite scrutiny and talk about problems, you will gain more credibility among your peers and policymakers.

While you're at it, go a little deeper. Don't settle for vague generalities like “build local capacity,” and “be flexible.” Take the time to discover the concrete lessons that can move your field forward.

It's refreshing—and rare—when officials at nonprofit organizations feel confident enough to say what worked and what didn't work. People will pay attention because admitting mistakes is so extraordinary in today's world. It will set you apart. It takes a strong organization to claim to have some of the answers and to admit that it doesn't have all of them.

### MISTAKE 3: Shying Away from Anything Controversial

Many nonprofit organizations, like most other groups, want to avoid controversy so they avoid taking a stand.

Also, many people who work in foundations and nonprofits are highly educated and they see the nuances of problems—which also makes it hard to take a stand. They know that the world is not black and white. There is always a qualifier to what they say.

There is nothing wrong with understanding that all issues are complex. But there is nothing wrong, and mostly everything right, with taking a stand.

By taking a stand you will stand out in the crowd. Policymakers, the media and the public will pay attention when you say something that challenges conventional wisdom. People are hungry for new solutions and new ways of thinking—at least the people that you want to influence first.



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**THE SOLUTION:** Find something in your work that defies conventional wisdom. Or that will make people uncomfortable. That will get you attention.

For example, Gary Yates, the president of the California Wellness Foundation, is bucking the standard practices of foundations. He does so by targeting more than 50 percent of his grants to cover the daily operating costs of non-profit organizations, including staff salaries and rent.

Such support is rare in the foundation world, which usually likes to fund programs that they can monitor and see results from. In fact, foundations as a whole typically give only 15 percent of their funds for operating support. But directors of nonprofit organizations say that in order to survive and make a difference they need day to day, or core, operating support from foundations.

Yates has written about the critical need for this type of support on the front page of his organization's web site.

In announcing the change, Yates made it clear why the California Wellness Foundation believed it was critical to offer operating support, in spite of what their colleagues in the field believed.

Yates wrote, "For example, a small clinic in rural Watsonville, California, has used such a grant to pay for a physician to increase patient visits. Revenue from these services was sufficient to keep the position funded after the grant ended—a win for the clinic, its patients and the foundation."

“The response to our new approach from our philanthropic colleagues, however, has been mixed,” he continued. “While some concur with the need for more core-operating support, others believe the California Wellness Foundation is headed in a direction that isn’t strategic and is unlikely to result in the “value-added” outcomes many believe strategic philanthropy should produce. We understand the ambivalence of many of our colleagues, yet we assert that core-operating support may be one of the most strategic approaches we can use.”

#### **MISTAKE 4: Talking Your Own Language**

It’s hard for other people to fully understand the worthwhile work you are doing if you can’t explain it clearly.

It is easy to get caught up with insider jargon that people use as shortcuts to explain what they mean. That jargon, however, is pretty meaningless to the outside world.

Here’s an example: I was hired by a foundation to write a report on a \$10 million national program that aimed to help states create access to health care for more people. The director and deputy director claimed that they had made a big difference in changing state policy.

But they could not communicate their impact in terms that an educated layperson could understand. They did not have examples, they spoke in abstractions, and they used insider language that left me baffled as to what they really meant.

Even worse for these staff directors, the foundation officers who had funded them could not understand what they had done. So when it came time for renewal, the foundation declined to give them any more money. The staff were angry and felt misunderstood. But they simply could not communicate their message in a way that even people in their field could grasp.

**THE SOLUTION:** Talk about your work in plain English. Your good works are going to go unnoticed if you can’t talk about them in clear, easy-to-understand English.

Find ways to talk about what you do in a way that a layperson could understand. This is critical to do. It’s not about “dumbing down” your work. It’s about communicating it in plain English to people who must understand what you’re doing.

One way to help do this is to write a headline for your work. Headlines should capture the key point of an article in a way that makes people want to read more. So, what is the headline of your program? What does it do to change people’s lives? Why should policymakers care?

Headlines are just the beginning so you can go into more detail later. But it’s really important to be able to think about ways to describe your work in simple, understandable words.

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## MISTAKE 5: Neglecting to Tell the Human Story

At the core of what you do is a desire to help a real, live person. But the need for data to show that these programs worked sometimes shoves aside your most important story: the people that you helped.

We are a storytelling culture and it's the stories that stay with us. If you want to influence policymakers and your peers, take the time to find the stories of human beings who you have helped or learned from.

And when you talk with the people you've helped, go beyond simply asking them what difference the programs made in their lives. Find out more about their lives and how this program fit in (or didn't). Give your readers a context and a story arc.

Also, ask them to tell you how the program could help them more. Ask them what didn't work for them. You may hear things that are out of your control or that make you uncomfortable. But you will likely hear something that will help you do your job better as well.

**THE SOLUTION:** Tell the stories of the people you helped that includes the drama and ups and downs of real-life.

If you do this, you will get at least two things:

- A compelling story about the difference the program made in people's lives that goes beyond a feel-good anecdote and will have more credibility.
- Useful information about what worked and how the program could be even better.

## MISTAKE 6: Ignoring the Needs of Your Audiences

Everyone in this sector has key audiences that they want to influence. It can be policymakers, a particular field, or colleagues. An organization might possess compelling research, or have funded a pilot project that shows great promise for broader replication. People need to know your work exists.

Yet I've seen over and over again that foundations and nonprofits don't take the time to find out what it is that their audience needs.

It's not enough to have fantastic information that people *should* use. If it doesn't seem relevant to their lives they won't use it.

If you want to influence policymakers and your peers, take the time to find the stories of human beings who you have helped or learned from.

Just one insight or idea can help someone do their job better.

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Think about it. How many reports or books are sitting on your shelf that you've never cracked open? Why not?

**THE SOLUTION:** Ask your audiences what they need.

**What information will make their lives easier?** For policymakers, it may be synthesizing research in a one-page document with references. For people at the grassroots level, it may be a practical step-by-step guide that includes common mistakes to avoid. Your board might want to know the impact of their funding in a certain area.

**For example, staff at the National Conference of State Legislatures connect with their key audiences the right way.** Their targets are state legislators and legislative staff. They want to provide information to help these state officials become leaders in their field.

**The staff never assumes that they know what these officials need.** They ask. They want to make sure that the information comes in a form that the state officials want to use.

**They continually test and tweak their information and the forms the information comes in.** They survey their audience, they hold focus groups, and they call up legislators and staffers and ask good questions. They change with the times.

**When the organization began offering health policy information, they delivered a twice monthly newsletter by mail.** As the Internet took over, they began sending it through e-mail. But just because the Internet was the hot new thing didn't mean that they abandoned their old ways of doing things—at least not immediately.

**They continued to also send hard copies of their newsletters because their surveys showed them that a segment of their key audience—older legislators—had not yet begun using the Internet on a regular basis.**

**The organization also tailored its information to the needs of different audiences.**

Legislators received short reports with bullet points on legislative topics. Legislative staff got more in-depth reports because they needed to know these subjects well. The national organization also created audiotapes and CDs for legislators to listen to in their cars as they traveled from their home to their state capitol.

**The National Conference of State Legislatures gets renewed funding all the time because they can show their funder the impact they make with their target audience.**

**In another case, an academic who had worked in substance abuse for years wanted to persuade primary care physicians to screen their patients for possible alcoholism.** He got nowhere. Physicians said they were too busy to add yet another question to their patient visits.

**But then the academic hit on something: find a way to make the job of primary care doctors easier.** He and his colleagues conducted research that shows that substance abuse can make many chronic diseases much worse. And primary care doctors spend most of their time

treating chronic diseases. So they have an interest in treating these patients more effectively. The academic found their self-interest.

**The academic also realized that none of these doctors would listen to him.** But they would listen to their colleagues, especially leaders in their field.

**So he commissioned physician leaders to write articles about how patients abusing alcohol can worsen common chronic diseases like diabetes.** The articles also talked about a simple screening tool that doctors could use to check for possible substance abuse. The academic got his message across in ways that appealed to doctors and helped them do their job.

**No matter what your audience, they will appreciate something that will help them do their jobs or think about things in a new way.** Think about the things you find valuable to read. Just one insight or idea can help someone do their job better.

### **MISTAKE 7: Too Many Cooks**

This is not a problem unique to the nonprofit sector but the nonprofit sector suffers from it as much as any other. Just as we can go under board in finding out what our audiences need, we can go way over board in involving people in foundations or nonprofits in messing around with a communications strategy.

For anything you want to get out to others, it's important to survey people within and outside of your organization for input.

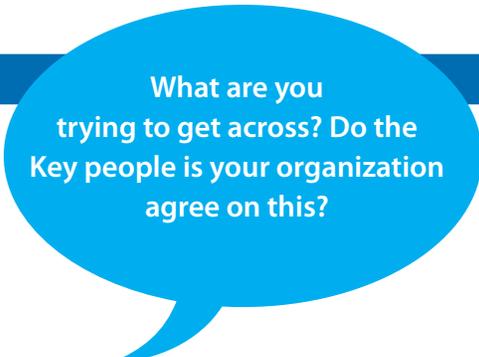
The problem comes in when there are endless revisions and no system to filter out the extraneous input from the helpful advice.

All of the work that you've done to figure out your message will suffer from too many cooks adding their input—and your message will turn to mush.

**THE SOLUTION:** Find a message and stick to it.

I often see this mistake when there wasn't enough preparation work to figure out the point of the communications product. What are you trying to get across? Do the key people in your organization agree on this? Once they do, get all of this in writing. If you run into problems later, you can point to that agreement to stick with your message. If you don't have that agreement, you are in for a lot of revisions and headaches.

It's also critical to set up a process to gather input and funnel it through one person at your organization. That person has the authority to decide how to use that input. This system is especially important when you work with an outside consultant. Otherwise, the consultant can be buffeted by conflicting advice and demands.



What are you trying to get across? Do the key people in your organization agree on this?

**You will end up with an unfocused communications product that doesn't say much and doesn't get your message across.**

A client hired me once because she wanted to shake up the on-line courses that her organization produced with funding from the federal government. She hired me because I was a reporter and would look at the course from a different angle. My client gave the parameters and let me run with it. She made the case to her boss about why they should try a new approach and then stuck with it.

**The result? The highest rate on-line course the client had ever had.** Federal government officials were so pleased that they used the course as an example of the success of the entire program they were funding. They replicated and sent the course all around the world.

## What's Next?

**Foundations and nonprofit organizations are making a difference in the world.**

You need to let people know about your good works.

**To recap, take these steps to make a bigger impact with your work:**

- 1). Toot your own horn.
- 2). Talk about what worked and what didn't work and be specific.
- 3). Find something in your work that defies conventional wisdom.
- 4). Talk about your work in plain English.
- 5.) Tell the stories of the people you helped that includes the drama and ups and downs of real-life.
- 6.) Ask your audiences what they need.
- 7.) Find a message and stick to it.

If you follow the guidelines I've outlined above, you will be light years ahead of many of your peers.

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Susan Parker is the owner of Clear Thinking Communications ([www.ClearThinkingCommunications.com](http://www.ClearThinkingCommunications.com)), a firm that helps foundations, nonprofit organizations and progressive businesses make a bigger impact. You can reach her at [susan@clearthinkingcommunications.com](mailto:susan@clearthinkingcommunications.com) or (802) 748-3070.