Here are two examples of Vu Le’s blog posts. The first is a fun display of his nonprofit humor - what he is also known for! The second is an example of serious thought-leadership in the form of a donor appreciation blog.

Hi everyone. I was on vacation this week, so did not have the mental energy to write a serious post. So here are quotes by famous people if they had worked in nonprofit. Check out the previous installments and write yours in the comment section.

1. “Float like a butterfly, sting like a grant rejection.” Muhammad Ali
2. “Advice is what we ask for when we already know the answer but still need to build the relationship with a potential major donor.” Erica Jong
3. “Don’t ever wrestle with a pig. You’ll both get dirty, and your staff will never let you choose another teambuilding activity again.” Cale Yarborough
4. “Believe those who are seeking Equity. Doubt those who find it.” Andre Gide
5. “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world, and they can do it better and faster if they got multi-year general operating funds.” Margaret Mead
6. “Before I was in nonprofit, I had six theories about how nonprofits should run; now I have worked at six nonprofits and have no theories but a whole lot of random pens.” John Wilmot
7. “Beware of monotony; it’s the mother of all deadly retreats.” Edith Wharton
8. “You can imprison a man, but not an idea. You can exile a man, but not an idea. You can kill a man, but not an idea. And unfortunately, that idea sometimes involves a golf tournament.” Benazir Bhutto
9. “Normal is not something to aspire to, it’s something to get away from. Except on a financial audit.” Jodi Foster
10. “When I’m hungry, I eat. When I’m thirsty, I drink. When I feel like saying something important to my board, I get a consultant.” Madonna
11. “I don’t mind what social entrepreneurs do, as long as they don’t do it in the streets and frighten the horses.” Victor Hugo
12. “Imagination was given to man to compensate for what he is not, and a sense of humor was provided to help him cope with some foundations’ expectations.” Oscar Wilde
13. “Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become emails. Watch your emails; they become meetings. Watch your meetings; they become more meetings. Watch these meetings; they become your destiny.” Lao-Tzu
14. “The most effective way to ask for money, is to do it.” Amelia Earhart
15. “Success is getting a grant that you want. Happiness is if it renews for several years.” Ingrid Bergman
16. “Always remember: If you’re alone in the kitchen preparing for a house party and you drop the hummus and veggies platter, you can just pick it up. Who’s going to know?” Julia Child
17. “What the nonprofit sector needs is more brilliant nonprofit leaders with humility. There are very few of us left.” Oscar Levant
18. “People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget that you got drunk at a gala.” Maya Angelou
19. “Grantwriting is not a matter of counting the words, but making the words count...And also counting the words.” Michelle Amand
20. “Do what you can, with what you have, where you are, and don’t forget self-care.” Theodore Roosevelt
21. “The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and they often join boards.” Bertrand Russell
22. “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life. OK...never mind what I said.” Confucius
23. “The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. This is why nonprofit people are so attractive.” Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

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Some positive feedback and appreciation for funders

A few months ago, our grantwriter and I dealt with a grant for $4,000 that comprised a five-page narrative and about 10 attachments. Luckily, of course, we have most of those documents ready in our Master Grant folder. The kicker, though, was the unusual requirement for us to print out a document with ten labels, each corresponding to one of the attachments, and literally cut out each of the tabs and paste it on to the attachments. So there I was, handling a glue stick for the first time in years, carefully pasting each tab. I was getting more and more irritated, gritting my teeth and wishing I had listened to that one palm reader in Saigon who told me to go into medicine or maybe law (I think my parents paid her).

I was gluing and fuming and writing a bitter, ranting blog post in my head. But then I realized that I tend to focus on all the irritating things some funders do, that I sometimes neglect all the great things that many funders do. Yeah, there are a lot of sucky, inequitable funding practices. But for the most part, there are lots of great things foundations are doing, and there many amazing program officers who make our work easier. It’s been a while since we provided our funding partners with some positive feedback and encouragement (see “Funders, thanks for doing these 12 awesome things.”) This post is to bring some balance by highlighting some specific things, big and small, funders do
that we nonprofits really appreciate. Thanks to the NWB Facebook community, as well as my colleagues in Seattle, for providing input, which I’m quoting below.

A few big and small things funders do that we really appreciate

Understanding an organization’s whole mission, not just the program that’s being funded. It is less messy to align programs to funding priorities. But nonprofit work so much more complicated. We really appreciate our funding partners who get that programs are connected.

“I was talking to a funder about a project that I was looking for a $1000 grant to support. I made an off-handed comment about another project the organization is working on in the same general area. She got really interested in the second idea. We talked yesterday and she is taking to her board a $5000 request for the first project and $10,000 for the second.”

Building on trust and not forcing us to reinvent wheels. Time is one thing none of us have much of. We are really appreciative of funders who save us time, which we can use to deliver services.

“Their application is not full of repetitive questions – if you answered it in the LOI, you won’t have to repeat yourself in the full proposal (if you are invited to submit one).”

“I had one funder who had been giving us an annual grant for operating support. After getting to know us, coming for site visits, and seeing our great outcomes, they called one day to tell us they’d fund us for the next three years at the same level and that we didn’t need to keep spending time going through the annual LOI and full proposal process. Just keep up the good work and send us a report once a year on how it’s going. So awesome!”

Trying some new stuff: As much as think the word “innovation” has been so over-used and misused that it’s lost most of its meaning and has become even harmful in some ways, it’s good for all of us to try new things. It’s especially great when funders embrace that spirit.

“I was part of a ‘flipped’ funding model recently where the funders went through a design process with potential grantees. They didn’t prescribe what they would fund, only that we all work together to get to the root of what our most challenging issues were, and what we could realistically do about them. The funders were awesome for a number of reasons – admitting the level of uncertainty, getting our input as boots-on-the-ground experts, being ridiculously responsive, and connecting us to more resources than they alone could provide. They were true partners and advocates. I hope the flipped funding model catches on, it was one of the most challenging and simultaneously rewarding experiences I’ve had in my career.”

Valuing nonprofit professionals’ skills and providing encouragement and morale boost. Because of the Funder Halo Effect, which is basically that funders tend to be perceived as smarter and more attractive, combined with the funding power dynamics, many of us greatly value funders’ opinions. It’s nice then, to get encouragement once a while.

“A program officer with whom I had built a great relationship throughout the years recommended me to a foundation who was looking for a fundraiser to lead a workshop on grant writing for their grantees. Not only was I incredibly honored and happy to lead the workshop, the foundation paid me a stipend for my time. The program officer’s recommendation was a true endorsement of my writing skills beyond just receiving grant funding! He valued my work and sung my praises to one of his peers.”
Paying us to do extra stuff. Due to the power dynamics, we often can’t say no to requests from funders, even when those requests take time and resources to achieve. Thank you to those who recognize both the power dynamics, and the fact that we need resources to get stuff done.

“We have two funders who asked us to present about our culturally-specific services to their staff and other partners, and…here’s the great and helpful part: They paid us generously for our time in preparing and presenting the material. (Yes, this was after we sent them the link to your post on Trickle-Down Community Engagement, but hey, they listened and responded!)”

Being a supportive partner. We are especially appreciative of funders who recognize themselves as equal partners with nonprofits. Kind of like a married couple. There may be bickering and occasional arguments, but overall we have each other’s back and support each other’s goals.

“I submitted an application to a new funder and had them call me up and say, ‘You’re not asking me for enough money. Go big.’ I named a bigger number and they said, ‘Bigger.’ It was this Development Director’s dream come true. My simple $25,000 request turned into a multi-year commitment that has yielded more than $1,000,000 over the last 5 years. But, just as good, they have always been a true partner. They treat us with a lot of respect and they are great communicators. We have run up against a couple of big challenges in our years of partnership and we have always been able to work together to come up with viable solutions by sharing ideas and opportunities. Though we have had bigger gifts, they are my all-time favorite funder because they are good people to have on your team.”

Trusting that we know what we’re doing. Constructive feedback is always appreciated, but it’s also nice when funders recognize that we spend a lot of time on our work and so should know it better than anyone.

“We had a funder visit our work. After the visit my boss asked the representatives of this company if they had any feedback for us on our programs. The company rep responded, ‘It would be presumptuous for us to provide suggestions on work in which you are clearly experts.’ They also give unrestricted funding. Sometimes dreams do come true.”

Investing in people. Funders who understand that it is people who do stuff, and invest in them, are awesome.

“We have a major funder who was asked by her alma mater back east to support a semester in LA program for art students. She said yes and added paid internships at local arts nonprofits she supports to the proposal, including us (a museum). 2 years later, these interns have been rock stars for us and the incoming crop of students, which I met yesterday, are fighting for who gets to intern here because past students have raved about working with us. One gift, three levels of impact!”

Helping break down walls among nonprofits. A severe problem we have in the sector is the Nonprofit Hunger Games. Unfortunately, so many funding practices reinforce this mentality. I am always grateful for funders who help nonprofits connect to and collaborate with one another.

“We have a funder that does an annual get together for other nonprofits that they support. We collaborate in a non-competitive environment and they treat us to great food, drink, and location!”

Providing additional support to organizations. There are several foundations that provide support in addition to funding. We really appreciate it, as those things often make a huge difference.
“A very impactful foundation here in NJ provides extensive board and ED training at no charge to grantees. They have also hired a public image company to provide feedback on grantee orgs social media and web presences. Basically they give grantees consultant services valued in the thousands of dollars at no charge. We love them!”

**Being game for interesting requests we nonprofits make.** Nonprofit work is certainly diverse and interesting. On occasion, we make out-of-left-field requests. Thanks to the funders who think, “What the heck, it'll make the community better.”

“I had a great major gift funder who I was able to recruit to dress as Alexis de Tocqueville for magazine cover and story promoting generous charitable giving.”

Despite my criticisms of many foundation practices that make me want to abandon civilization and live as a hermit (but with Netflix), there are many really cool program officers and foundation staff who work really hard to make sure we nonprofits have the resources to do our work. I know I give you a hard time sometimes, but I am deeply appreciative of all the foundation staff who have been and continue to be my mentors, cheerleaders, colleagues, and drinking buddies. The constructive feedback will continue—please don’t make me literally cut and paste anything ever again!—but for this week at least, a heartfelt thank-you for all you do.

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