

Q & A with Kristina L. Mayer, Founder of KLMayer Consulting Group

Kristina provides answers to questions about key terms and concepts in education and philanthropy. We know you've got questions, so have a seat and let's chat!

Q: Why is organizational capacity a special challenge for nonprofits?

A: Organizational capacity can be described as all the assets and resources that an organization builds up in order to draw upon to do their work. These include leadership and management structures, technology, human resources, and fund development – basically, everything that it takes for an organization to be fully operational.

In my work, I see three recurring challenges for nonprofits seeking to build organizational capacity. The first is that money for funding nonprofits' operating needs is often difficult to get. Funding is often targeted to specific projects, which I see as a flaw in the theory of action of many major funders. Although it seems obvious, it's difficult for nonprofits to show the results and benefits of keeping their lights on and their doors open.

Secondly, the right mix of organizational skills can be difficult to come by. Nearly every nonprofit struggles with board development – identifying and recruiting the right people to be on the board, then training, retaining and mobilizing them. It's difficult work. Likewise, nonprofit leadership can be uneven because nonprofit leaders can rise through the ranks with wildly varying backgrounds and diverse vantage points. A common difficulty is a nonprofit leader with passion for the subject matter but not very strong management skills. Training and mentoring are services KLMayer offers to address these challenges (see below).

Thirdly, nonprofits are often created from a place of passion, so developing the infrastructure and systems to support an organization over time can feel like a diversion from the desired action. If you're an activist nonprofit leader all fired up about saving the trees or feeding the poor, the last thing you want to do is stay in the office and create a new organizational chart. In cases like this, hiring a professional to help your nonprofit with organizational capacity may be a really smart move.

Q: What's the difference between training, mentoring and coaching?

A: Training occurs as part of an ongoing education program where I'm teaching or helping to refine the particular philanthropic skills of a group of philanthropy professionals. I may work alone or with a training partner in making grantwriting or grantmaking processes more transparent, presenting effective techniques, and empowering the participants to try out the skills and use them successfully after the training.

Mentoring is the development of a longer-term relationship with someone wanting to grow professionally in the philanthropic field, whether they are on a foundation's board, writing grants, working for a nonprofit, etc. They may have taken on a new position or new responsibilities, and they may need someone to guide them through particular ins and outs of philanthropy. Or it might be someone who already has experience, but who needs to establish a new set of relationships in order to

accomplish a particular goal. In this case, I would mentor them in how to approach the right people, create those relationships, and use them effectively over time.

Coaching is working with someone who is already a nonprofit executive, manager or other type of leader in need of what is usually short-term help in a specific area. Frequently, a nonprofit executive is seeking added, outside insight in beefing up their staffing and organizational development strategies. Or they may wish to develop technical expertise of some kind – for example, in initiative design and implementation – and they want to work with me and take advantage of my experience, knowledge and contacts.

Sometimes nonprofit executives – frequently women – feel the need to enlist the perspective and insights of someone knowledgeable and objective about their situation, but someone who is not their boss, not on their board, staff, foundation, etc. The executives need to interface with another professional who can listen to and help them with their thinking processes about challenges they face, and who can support them in their decision-making. The issues nonprofit leaders face vary enormously, from, "How do I have a life? How do I balance this really intense nonprofit work with everything else I have going on?" to "I'm changing my career path and applying for jobs. It's not going the way I had hoped. Can you help me pursue this more effectively?" I work with them as a partner to help navigate these challenges.

Q: What is grantmaking?

A: Grantmaking refers to the way a philanthropic foundation, individual or government agency allocates resources. It is the other end of grantseeking. Nonprofit organizations typically go through a formal proposal process to solicit funds (grants) from a foundation, individual or government agency in order to accomplish a goal or fulfill a need in the community. Grantmaking is the process of initiating and fielding these grant proposals, providing the funding, and ensuring that the proposals are effectively implemented.

So grantmaking involves more than just figuring out where to give money. Before a project can be funded and implemented, grantmakers need to perform due diligence by investigating the organization requesting the grant, its capacity and its history, as well as the scope of the proposed project. Only then can a reasonable judgment be made about the feasibility of the project in the proposed context. There are various tools to use in this investigation, but there is also a bit of an art to determining which organizations are really functioning at a level where they are able to make the best use of a grantmaker's resources.

Then there is the negotiation, oversight, and relationship-building that goes into ensuring that an organization uses a grant effectively. In education grantmaking, for example, a funder will want to oversee how effectively the recipient has utilized their funding by monitoring a grant's implementation, gathering formative feedback, and establishing criteria by which to measure the success of the grant and the quality of the grantmaker's investment. These are all processes that KLMayer can assist with.

Q: What is an initiative?

A: An initiative is a comprehensive plan that directs a suite of grants toward realizing a common goal over time. An initiative can have more power and punch than a single grant. It's also easier to evaluate a cluster of grants focused on a single topic than it is to evaluate a stand-alone grant.

What we've learned from experience is that single grants don't result in powerful change. An initiative is more effective tool for change than a loose set of grants because it capitalizes on relationships, by enlisting a group of people who have similar interests in making the initiative successful.

For example, if an education grantmaker wants to target improvements to a specific need or area of teaching practice, they will want an education initiative that approaches the goal on many different levels and uses many different tools.

Recently I worked on a drop-out reduction initiative called Re-Investing In Youth that focused on ways to re-engage kids, especially kids of color, in the educational system. The initiative was a collaborative of juvenile justice groups, municipal leaders, county executives and educators in the City of Seattle/King Co., and the Casey Family Foundation. I co-authored the final report, "Educating All Our Children: A Comprehensive Plan for Reducing the Drop-out Rate in King County."

Q: How would you start an initiative?

A: Just as a new business generates a business plan to determine if there is a need for its services and potential for its success in the marketplace, a new initiative requires some background research to assess its potential to positively affect the targeted field. With an education initiative, this might take the form of an environmental scan to determine whether there are other grants, organizations or education professionals focused on improving the same areas. We would also use tools such as focus groups, analysis of current research on the issue, and collection of feedback gathered directly from the field. From this research we would generate a plan that would begin to shape the initiative by making recommendations on multiple levels: state (the policy level), district (the infrastructure level) and school site (actual day-to-day instruction level.)

The next step would be to mobilize a force of influential people and organizations to work together toward the initiative's success. This is known as strategic networking. Throughout, we would use a multi-dimensional approach that employs strategies such as research, communications and marketing to get everyone on the same page about what we're trying to accomplish.

Sometimes the initiative might provide grants to intermediary organizations that are able to deliver a specific set of products or services. Or such an organization might supply tools such as evaluation forms or questionnaires used in the evaluation process.

Always important to the process is evaluation. Formative evaluation is a powerful tool to improve program delivery and test assumptions during implementation. Summative evaluation helps to measure how the initiative was able to improve

policy, practice and teacher or student performance, while also demonstrating whether the resulting change was a sound investment for the grantmaker.

Q: What do you mean by strategic networking?

A: Strategic networking is utilizing contacts in the field to the greatest advantage. A person who is good at making connections between contacts is known as a “connector.”

Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* defines a “connector” as someone who knows a lot of people. They can "span many worlds as a function of something intrinsic to their personality, some combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability and energy." Gladwell also says that "by having a foot in different worlds, they have the effect of bringing them together." This description certainly fits me, as my background bridges the fields of education and philanthropy. I combine being socially motivated with wide-ranging knowledge, which enables me to connect people, ideas and resources.

Strategic networking performs a transforming and vitalizing function in philanthropy, keeping ideas and actions from becoming stuck on a static level. Significant changes via philanthropy happen when those on the outside of the system and those on the inside work together. Outside pressure – from grantmakers and professionals like me – brings fresh knowledge, different perspectives, funding and motivation. This activates the goodwill, effort and political capital of those on the inside of the system. It is sometimes called an inside/outside leadership strategy.

Q: What is a community foundation?

A: A community foundation is a tax-exempt nonprofit organization administering a pool of community capital (a trust) built through the contributions of many, and allocating funds to fill various community needs. The foundation identifies, builds, and manages long-term assets, including cash securities, real estate, closely held stocks, and other items of value such as those made by life or remainder trusts. Its structure makes it possible for a wide range of donors to pool charitable funds to support their favorite nonprofit causes, usually in a small geographic area – hence the modifier “community” foundation.

A community foundation can be a catalyst to action, by studying areas of unmet need and using the power of its endorsement to meet community goals. It can also be a neutral community convener to tackle community challenges, by helping people actualize their desire to create a healthy, viable community over the long-term.

In 2004, KLMayer Consulting Group organized the establishment of the Jefferson County Community Foundation in my home county. Its mission is “to inspire donors to invest in Jefferson County and to achieve their charitable goals from generation to generation through grant making, enlightened civic leadership and strategic investments.” I am eager to help other communities create community foundations of their own!

Q: What is a giving circle?

A: A giving circle is a group of people who come together informally for philanthropic purposes. Sometimes giving circles are called "social investment clubs."

Typically a giving circle is comprised of a group of colleagues or friends who wish to support a particular cause, such as women's issues, the environment, health or education. They each make donations to the circle and then decide together where that pooled money will be given or granted. In the process, giving circle members learn about philanthropy and the needs of the issue or community they wish to support. It can be a very engaging and eye-opening process.

Giving circles can be hosted or sponsored by individuals or by charitable organizations such as community foundations through which members make grants together. But most importantly, giving circles provide donors with the hands-on experience of using philanthropy as a vehicle for social change. Members may be involved in issuing requests for proposals, reviewing proposals, and making site visits to see how their work is going. They learn to focus on how the group's efforts can have an impact and they leverage the power of their financial contributions by volunteering their own time, interest and experience. Thus members of a giving circle work collectively and gain an in-depth understanding of their area of interest, while also connecting meaningfully with the causes and communities they care about.

One of the giving circles I've been involved with formed the Nicaragua 2001 Foundation, which is focused on giving time and money to Nicaraguan NGOs in an effort to enhance economic self-sufficiency and well-being through micro-lending programs.

Q: What's on the horizon for your work in the philanthropic industry?

A: I'm excited about helping make philanthropy work for small businesses. Successful small businesses rely on plans – they plan for business strategy, marketing and revenue generation. They also need to plan for giving.

There are many motivations for giving – being involved in community activities, helping a cause with obvious connections to the business's niche, or creating and promoting a culture of giving – but whatever they may be, small businesses owners need to be conscious about how philanthropy is part of their plan for success.

I'd like to help small businesses ask the right questions and make the right choices around their giving. For example, what are identifiable community needs and how do they match the business's interests or passions? Are there expectations for giving from the Chamber of Commerce or their peers? What issues or causes do the business's customers care about? What kinds of activities would inspire the goodwill of their employees and customers? Philanthropy is an area where businesses can make choices about values and moral commitment, while also developing their reputation or "brand."

With my experience, I can walk a business through all the steps of a consciously outlined giving plan: How to determine a budget, how to choose the recipients, what's the best timing and process to use. One aspect that's really important is the communications plan: how to share news of the business's giving program with its employees, customers, and community. I can also help businesses with follow-up, such as staying meaningfully involved in their causes if they choose to. And of course I can help them evaluate and refine their giving plan to make sure it is both successful and satisfying.

This is just one of the areas where I see KLMayer's strategic philanthropy services growing.