

# Understanding Your Motivations for Giving

Giving back to society can be as easy as clicking the “Donate Now” button on a website or rounding up a total when paying a bill. However, for those who have significant resources to give, identifying and articulating a reason for giving is the first step to defining a philanthropic plan of action that will have maximum impact.

Many donors come to philanthropy already knowing the issue or issues they care about. This might include addressing climate change, funding education reform, or helping combat type 2 diabetes. Even with this clarity, though, your first step in creating a solid strategy is defining your focus even further.

Understanding a problem informs how you address it. This means clarifying motivations, framing the big issues that relate to those motivations, narrowing the focus and listing the outcomes you want to see.

For those striving to make a meaningful impact, examining the basis of your desire to become a philanthropist is a good idea. Whatever your motivations, the ideas you generate will be useful touchstones to return to when making decisions about your philanthropy. Those decisions can be anything from organizational structure, focus areas and how you approach collaboration, to strategy, governance models and the selection of grantee partners.

This chapter will examine why it’s important to understand the motivations behind your philanthropy, explore some popular motivations, and highlight some of the decisions that stem from these motivations.



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## *The Importance of Starting With Your Motivations*

Exploring and understanding your motivations can impact your focus, your priorities and your commitment. This may seem an unnecessary delay, particularly if you are eager to get started on your philanthropy, but those who understand why they are engaging in philanthropy tend to feel more satisfied and confident with the decisions they make.

*Focus:* the more self-aware you are, the more focused you will be in your philanthropy. When you understand your motivations, you can assess whether your choices and decisions are aligned with them.

*Priorities:* successful philanthropy takes time, energy and commitment. If you know why you are engaging in philanthropy, you can figure out how to best integrate it into your life so that it feels satisfying, meaningful and rewarding.

Some motivations may be inconsistent or even seem mutually exclusive, so clearly articulating them can help you balance various priorities within your philanthropic programs. For instance, if one of your motivations is responding to funding requests from friends and family, you may intentionally set aside some of your giving for causes that may not further your vision.

In such instances, exploring your motivation can help you set parameters on which requests you will consider and how much you will allocate to these requests. Being intentional about how you handle those requests can bring more joy through that generosity, or at least give you a method to navigating such requests.

*Dedication:* clarity of vision and the clear understanding of your motivations can also help you to choose a strategy, as well as issues and grantees that will hold your attention. Real, lasting impact often takes a long time, and one must be aware that disruptive forces can create unforeseen conditions that need to be addressed and supported.

Issues that can only be solved by changing complicated systems take time to change and donors with staying power are instrumental to this change. *For example, a new approach to delivering maternal healthcare would require a fundamental shift in how hospitals operate.*

Funding could initially cover research to get a better understanding of the issue you want to get involved with. The efficacy of the chosen approach would then need to be demonstrated through pilot projects and trials. Next, publication, storytelling and workshops might be needed to share and promote the ideas. Then advocacy might be needed to encourage the healthcare system to make necessary policy and regulatory changes.

Ongoing training of medical professionals and administrators might be required to keep the system accountable and operational once it has been adopted.

All of these stages of the decision-making process – and this is not a comprehensive breakdown – are better served by funders with staying power.

Donors who achieve the best outcomes are those who have chosen something they stay committed to, despite occasional setbacks, and for which progress feels personally meaningful.

Beyond simply "giving back" or "doing good," having clarity about your motivations can help with focus, priorities and dedication, and give you a stronger connection to your philanthropy.

# Clarifying Your Motivations

Motivations can vary. Sometimes they stem from a personal experience such as a health issue or educational challenge. Most philanthropists are motivated by a combination of factors that together result in a unique strategy that is both satisfying and effective in addressing important social and environmental issues.

Sometimes motivations are about righting the wrongs of the past. This can even mean addressing the harm that may have been done in amassing the wealth that makes your philanthropy possible.

Sometimes motivation is more about using philanthropy as a tool to strengthen relationships. Below is a list of categories – not exclusive by any means – to help you consider what might motivate you.



## Responsibility

Whether philanthropic funds have been inherited or earned, many philanthropists feel an intrinsic sense of obligation to steward the funds well. They understand that once the funds have been put into a foundation or donor-advised fund, the funds are committed to improving the public good and the donors want to ensure the funds have as much impact as possible.



## Family

For some, philanthropy can be a tool for family unity and a way to coalesce around shared interests and passions. If this is you, then it is important to develop a process that engages with your family in a meaningful and productive way, taking all perspectives into account.



## Individual Experience

Everyone brings their own life experiences to their philanthropy. In many cases, philanthropic action is inspired by experiences of personal hardship. Those who have suffered or seen close family members and friends suffer from debilitating physical or mental health issues might choose to support research into improved medicines or care.



## Urgency

Many funders are motivated by the exigency of finding solutions to the big issues facing our planet, such as climate change or food security. Such funders are more apt to want to expend more resources sooner and faster, feeling that we don't have the luxury of time. This is one aspect of the time-limited philanthropy movement and the philosophy of "giving while living," essentially the idea of expending most, if not all, of your philanthropic resources during your lifetime, rather than passing them on to the next generation.



## Addressing Injustice

Many funders recognize that philanthropic resources are accumulated because of a system that privileges some people over others. In response, some feel a moral imperative to use their philanthropic funds to try to change that system or address the results of certain inequities. This might include work to support criminal justice reform, get-out-the-vote initiatives in democracies, projects for improving economic inclusion or human rights, and others focusing on improving equity.



## Exposure to Others

Exposure to the hardship of others through volunteering or travel can also motivate action. On the other end of the spectrum, those who have benefitted from nonprofit or philanthropic programs may choose to "pay it forward," supporting scholarships, debt alleviation, mentorship programs and more.



## Financial Benefits

Depending on a country's tax system, donations and permanently dedicating resources to philanthropy can have meaningful tax benefits. While this may not always be a primary motivation for giving, it is often a factor.



## Faith

Philanthropy can be the expression of someone's most deeply held values. Often those values are strongly shaped by religious and spiritual convictions. Indeed, the act of being philanthropic is enshrined in many of the world's major religions. Religious beliefs can be clearly conveyed through the support of religious and religiously affiliated institutions, or through more subtle methods.



## Recognition

Some funders give because they want their name or their family's name associated with a certain cause or act of charity. They may do so because they feel proud of the support they can provide or of their family using its resources in a certain way. They may feel that lending their name to a cause or effort will spur others to action.



## Legacy

Funders may choose to direct their philanthropy in ways that honor the memory and legacy of their predecessors. For those who inherit philanthropic vehicles, this may include continuing to support many of the same organizations or issues. For others, it may be following the spirit of the giving or values of their parents, grandparents or ancestors. It could be that professionally and personally their mother was an innovator in her field and so, in honor of their mother, the funder is now interested in supporting innovation and entrepreneurship. Or it could be that your ancestors valued their relationship with the land, so you decide to support land conservation and restoration.

Conversely, some funders are uncomfortable with the legacy of their families. Maybe their fortunes were made through an extractive process that damaged the health of their family's employees or negatively impacted the natural resources of the land on which they were working. In such a case, the funder might choose to dedicate resources to restorative work in the health or environmental fields.

# Key Questions for Assessing Your Motivation

One way to start exploring what motivates your philanthropy is to ask some fundamental questions about giving in general. The goal here is to start a process of understanding that you can continue with your advisors, friends and family.

For those doing philanthropy as part of a foundation board, with other family members or with a life partner, taking the time to understand each participant's motivations can help guide your joint decisions on focus areas, grantees and structure, so it is important to have these conversations together.

1. Have I found fulfillment in giving, and if so, where is it greatest?
2. What life experiences – or individuals – have inspired me to give?
3. Where have I learned the most about giving, and where could I learn more?
4. Has anything held me back from giving in certain ways or to certain areas? If so, what are those limitations and how can they be addressed?

Once you've assessed your experience with giving, you can move onto a deeper analysis relating to your emotions, experience and feelings about society's needs:

## *Emotions*

- What do you care about?
- What are you drawn to (in the news, etc.)?
- What do you feel inspired by/passionate about?
- What do you see as an expression of your values?

## *Practicality*

- Where do you already have expertise/experience?
- Where would you use resources to grow expertise/knowledge base?
- Where do you have networks and connections?

## *Urgency of Need*

- What are the big issues of our time that need attention and resources now?
- Where do you think the perpetuation of injustices needs to be disrupted?

Considering your motivation is key to ultimately defining a philanthropic plan of action and maximizing its impact. By reviewing the above, you can gain some clarity on what you care about. This process of understanding your motivations is the first step in formalizing what you want to achieve with your giving.

# Tippet Rise Art Center – Connecting People With the Arts and Nature



Tippet Rise Art Center, situated on a 12,500-acre working ranch at the foothills of Montana's Beartooth Mountains, is a unique organization that combines art, music, architecture, and nature to create a one-of-a-kind cultural experience for its guests.<sup>1</sup> The center was founded in 2016 by Peter and Cathy Halstead, who wanted to create a place where people could connect with the arts and nature in a meaningful way.

## Inclusiveness Across the Board

According to Lindsey Hinmon, the Co-Director of Tippet Rise, the success of the organization is due to the generosity, creativity, and inclusiveness of its founders. She said, "The mentality, vision, and the motivation really stems from who Peter and Cathy Halstead truly are and the warmth that they exude...the inclusiveness, not the exclusiveness, that they make every single person—guest, artist, musicians, staff member, whoever it might be—feel."

The Halsteads' commitment to inclusivity and their belief in the power of art and nature to enhance each other has led to the creation of unique experiences for Tippet Rise guests. "We're committed to creating new experiences for people that further underscore how art, music, architecture, nature can enhance one another and make for a more powerful experience," says Hinmon.

## Clear Motivations

But it's not just about creating new experiences. For Hinmon, it's about staying true to the organization's initial motivations and ensuring that everyone who interacts with Tippet Rise understands the mission behind the project. "It really comes down to staying true to those initial motivations, and making sure that everything that

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tippetrise.org>

happens at the organization is fueled by the vision the Halsteads set forth in the beginning."

The Halsteads also founded the Adrian Brinkerhoff Poetry Foundation, a sister organization of Tippet Rise that shares Tippet Rise's belief in the power of the arts to inspire and connect people.<sup>2</sup> "We recently launched a joint poetry film series featuring five Rocky Mountain West-based poets who each offered readings of their own poems and favorites by poets that inspired them. The films were captured in locations across Tippet Rise and can be viewed on both of our organization's websites," explains Hinmon.

Through this partnership, Tippet Rise has been able to amplify the voices of underrepresented artists and expand its audience base. "We want to continue to grow as an organization at a pace that feels really natural to us," says Hinmon.

## Commitment to Vision

In the end, Tippet Rise's success can be attributed to the Halsteads' unwavering commitment to the organization. As Hinmon puts it, "We want to create a place where people feel like they can come, and be inspired, and be inspired in a really natural and organic way." Tippet Rise Arts Center is a testament to what can be accomplished when creativity, generosity, and inclusivity are at the heart of an organization.

**"It really comes down to staying true to those initial motivations, and making sure that anyone engaging with the organization, whether on the staff or a visitor, understands the motivations that are fueling this project."**

**Lindsey Hinmon,**  
Co-Director of Tippet Rise

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brinkerhoffpoetry.org>