

# 4 Things Grant Makers Look For When Reviewing Grant Proposals

Here are the 4 things grant makers look for when evaluating proposals.

## Introduction

Rob: Hi, I'm Rob Martin, and I work at the First Fruit Institute, and this series of podcasts is about fundraising in the Christian kingdom.

Most of it is based on a book called [When Money Goes on Mission](#), and this podcast is actually sponsored by that book, published by Moody, written by me about fundraising in the developing world.

Today's guest is a senior program project officer at the [First Fruit Institute](#) and at First Fruit, a major US foundation engaged exclusively in missions funding across the world.

Steve's gonna take us into a, he's gonna give us an insight into how he approaches his work.

So really, if you're a development person or a leader of a mission, or you're considering fundraising, and you've never gone to a foundation or had the ability to get an appointment with a foundation to talk to one of their program officers or to their executive director about making a grant, you must realize this first thing, and that is is that the program officer.

In this case Steve, the project officer, is going to, will be asking a lotta questions and seeking a lot of connecting kind of information.

Steve will take us through that, but his job is to open the gate and allow you to make a pitch to the board of directors, who actually make the decision for the funding.

So we're gonna talk about how Steve, in the large categories, approaches his job.

I've known Steve for a very long time. He's been 15 years about now, Steve, with First Fruit?

Steve: Right.

Rob: And he's traveled extensively across the world, has participated in, honestly, hundreds of grants by now that he's brought forward, and we won't even get into the amount of money, but it's significant, or just keep in mind that it's significant because that's what foundations do, is we make larger grants.

Now, in the whole of Christendom, foundations are a very small part of the entire giving in Christendom, but they're targeted, and they're one of the few people that put a sign out and say we give money.

In effect, that's what the thing is. Steve has been with the First Fruit Institute now about five, six years, five years?

And he is our senior project officer, and that is is that he has a significant funding portfolio at First Fruit in its core grant meeting of looking at the family-based movement, and I'll give Steve a chance to explain that in a minute or so, but so his grants, most of the grants that he works on are in the area of rehoming orphans, and so welcome, Steve.

Thanks for being with the podcast today, and why don't you tell us just a little bit about your area of focus at First Fruit, and then let's get into what is it you look for.

Let's kind of give them an insight into how the process works, what you look for when you're making a grant. What's it like?

# FIRST FRUIT

## What Steve Does at First Fruit Institute

Steve: Okay, great. So what I would say is the area that I work, over 10 years ago, First Fruit was looking at our granting, and we decided to do what we called cluster granting.

So I'm saying this because there are boundaries put on me by our board in how we're to do granting, so I'm not making-

Rob: By boundaries, you mean, you're actually talking about guardrails. This is the street we want you on. Don't get off the street.

Steve: Yes, right. So they don't leave me out there really, you know, just to do whatever Steve wants to do and pursue, and so they give me directions.

Rob: And they have to, you know, this is a very important thing for someone coming new to a foundation to understand, is that you're working under direction.

Steve: Right, right, see, I don't, while I can make choices within that boundary, I can't go outside of it.

So that boundary's important because in the work that I do in family-based care, they chose where they wanted me to spend my time and attention, so that informs my travel.

That informs my research, my reading, and all of the aspects of my job is I'm looking for people that are doing good work, that are bringing change into the way that orphans are cared for, and bringing to me opportunities where we can come alongside of them to pilot projects and to fund things that are gonna make long-lasting change, not just temporary change, so-

Rob: Yes, right, and so the, the specific instructions that you have, and the reason that you have a cluster like this to work on, this one specific area of family-based care, vulnerable children, orphans, orphans and widows, you know, it's still a fairly large area, but it is, it is very specific to that, and in addition, it's a new field.

That's why First Fruit's spending time in it as much as you are, and part of your instructions from First Fruit have been to help the field, help the movement, and all the players in the movement, move along.

So you've been asked by the board to be tactical in how the whole, and they want you looking at the whole of the movement as well as the individual parts, so this is more than just grant-making; it's also encouraging a movement, so you need leaders who are coming to you with grants, or you're meeting with grants that can both move, that are both working for transformation in the individual area they're working for, but also the whole movement.

Steve: Correct, so that starts in that whole purpose alignment, and what I often smile at is people will get on the First Fruit website and say, "Oh, my gosh, we have 100% alignment with you."

And I always have a big smile, and I say, "So do 100,000 other organizations out there," 'cause our boundary on the website is pretty large, and so it's mainly-

Rob: On purpose?

Steve: Sorry?

Rob: I say, it's on purpose. Even though it's large, it's restricted to the developing world. It's restricted to leadership and you know, other things like that, so.

Steve: Right, so then, when you're on a specific topic like this, the boundaries are still large, but if you're looking to fund people that are gonna be change agents, that are gonna be pushing the boundaries, so they're creating long-term change, you know, if you picture it as a bullseye, you know, the outer rings still make sense, but you wanna try to do as much granting toward the center than the outside.



# 1. Alignment

Rob: Okay, so the first thing you look at is if I, if I've got this right, is alignment.

Steve: Correct, right.

Rob: So tell me what that is. We've hinted at it. You know, I've said, "Here's your portfolio." Tell me what alignment means to you.

Steve: So for me, I have a document, a family-based care document that talks about different places we want to be granting and encouraging.

So when I look at alignment, so for example, we want to take, get orphans out of institutional care, back into families, so when a grant comes to me that's helping an orphan age out and doing that appropriately, that still is a good grant.

But it would be much more at the outside edges of what my purpose should be about than the inside, so that's, it still is a great opportunity, perhaps, and you know, Jesus is being proclaimed in all of that, but I have a budget, and I need to constantly be pushing myself-

Rob: Well, yeah, and the first thing is is that you have to be in the family-based care space.

Steve: Yes.

Rob: Or there's no alignment.

Steve: Correct.

Rob: Then within the family-based care space, then you start looking at very specific aspects of the movement because you're trying to move the movement.

You want people that are, in fact, you've even got a criteria that you've developed of champions, practitioners, and see, I even remember those.

Steve: Right, advocates, champions.

Rob: And then advocates.

Steve: And practitioners.

Rob: And so you're sorting out the people you're meeting in terms of alignment in those three sectors of, and you could explain that at another time, but this isn't a primer on how to get a grant out of you.

So forgive me for that. This is a primer on how a program officer goes about their job, and in this case at a prominent foundation like First Fruit.

How does Steve go about his job?

You have to remember this: every foundation is different, has different requirements, different approaches, but the principles are almost the same.

So first and foremost is alignment. Then what are you looking for, Steve?



## 2. Authentic People

Steve: So then I'm looking for authentic people.

So I'm looking for people that don't try to tell me what I wanna hear but are telling me what God's put on their hearts and their ministry, and then they're looking to see where alignment is, and they're willing to walk away.

I can spot someone that's just trying to tell me what I wanna hear, and I honestly find that kind of offensive 'cause it's not, I don't think it's that true-

You know, in your book, you talk about [the communion of giving and receiving](#). It's not, it's not a true, it's not that communion of giving and receiving.

They're seeing me as a check, not a person that's also-



You know, our foundation's been called to do things in God's name, if you will, if I'm saying that right, but you know, God has put on our founders and our board things to pursue with the money they've been entrusted to, and so, like, I wanna do that with people, not just be the coins in there, you know, or the checkbook that funds it. There's more to it that we're about.

So authentic, so I wanna see people that are vulnerable with me, that tell me the good, bad, and the ugly of what's happened in their ministry and the challenges they have 'cause that's-

One of the great things at First Fruit is we get to be super relational, and I know not, you know, some foundations are, like, "Fill out this form," you know, and you hit send, and maybe you'll hear back from them or not, but we're a lot more interactive, so that relationship and that vulnerability is super important.

Rob: Yeah, and in this case, if they're authentic, that means you've somehow achieved understanding their voice.

Steve: Yes.

Rob: Not their answers to your questions. That's not easy.

Steve: Correct, I don't wanna feel like they're, yeah, I don't wanna feel like they're coming to me with the, like, manual of a sales pitch, you know?

Rob: Okay, so I'm a, I'm a somebody that's watching this podcast, listening to this podcast. I've been tasked, I'm newly tasked with approaching foundations. I actually have some connections.

How do, I mean, and this kinda sounds silly, is how do I be authentic?

What does that actually mean? What's your advice to me about how to be authentic with you?

Because what you're actually saying is, "Be real. Don't try to manipulate the situation, but just be who you are, and accept that that's going to be received or not received." Is that what you're saying?

Steve: I am, and it's not, I don't think every foundation allows that process to happen, so where you are able to have interaction with your program officer or a staff person at a foundation, don't just keep throwing ideas at them.

Ask them questions like, "What are you interested in?" You know, "This is what we're doing. What is striking a chord with you where we see alignment happening or not alignment?"

You know, and try to get that person into a conversation if you can.

## HOW TO APPROACH NEW DEVELOPMENT OFFICERS

Rob: What if the person, like I was saying, first time on the job, first meeting?

That, what if they come to you, and they're, because of all the first-time aspects of it, they're inarticulate.

They can't quite get you to understand that they're being authentic, or they're thinking this is weird, you know, you know. I mean, I don't know, but you have to have a grace period there, don't you?

Steve: Absolutely, so you know, whenever you go shopping or something, and you'll see the name tag, and they're like, "I'm new."

So whenever I know someone's new, I personally do give them that grace, and I've actually had development people that I have a really hard time working with, but because I have track record, or I have a relationship with some other people within the organization, I'm willing to work through that because I believe in the work that they're doing.

So somehow, I've been able to go around it, but if you're a new development officer, again, that vulnerability part of, you know, "I'm new. I'm discovering. I might not have all your answers, but I, gosh darn it, will go back, and I will get them for you."

Rob: Well, you nailed an important one there. The thing that bugged me the most in the 43 years I've been doing foundation work.

Literally. In the 37 years that I've been directly related in a director's job, the struggle to know how to communicate with me, and how for me to communicate with them, really forced this to be the big issue.

That's why we started inviting proposals rather than just receiving 'em so that we could interact with the people.

That's why we traveled, so that we could see them in their settings rather than in our setting, which is, you know, office buildings in California.

I mean, you know, it's just, they're intimidating to a lot of people, you know. It's 'cause it's a business that we're getting the money from, and I mean a real business, a big one with lots of employees, and okay, so your third thing-

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SHOWING CONFIDENCE AND HUMILITY AS A DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

Steve: But yeah, Rob. Wait, were you gonna say, "But don't, as a development person, don't pretend?" Like, we can smell that out like nobody's business.

Rob: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Steve: Don't pretend; if you pretend, like, that's where we

Rob: Be honorable.

Steve: Get turned off. Be real, be vulnerable, and again, that's not gonna work for everyone, right? Some people might want you to pretend, so you're gonna have to steel that out in every meeting, but know-

Rob: Well, you have to be confident.

Just, that's, confidence is attractive, period, but confidence comes in humility. That's when it's attractive, is when it comes in humility.

So let's say Steve asks a question of you that is beyond your ability to answer. You honestly don't know the information, never thought you needed the information.

Could be any number of reasons that you don't have the information. Your confidence says, "Steve, I don't have that information. I'll get back to you."

Steve: "But that's a great question, and I'm gonna go hunt that down." So I've heard that, yeah.

Rob: Yeah, yeah. I shoulda thought of that, or you handle the situation naturally, like you would with somebody you love and care about.

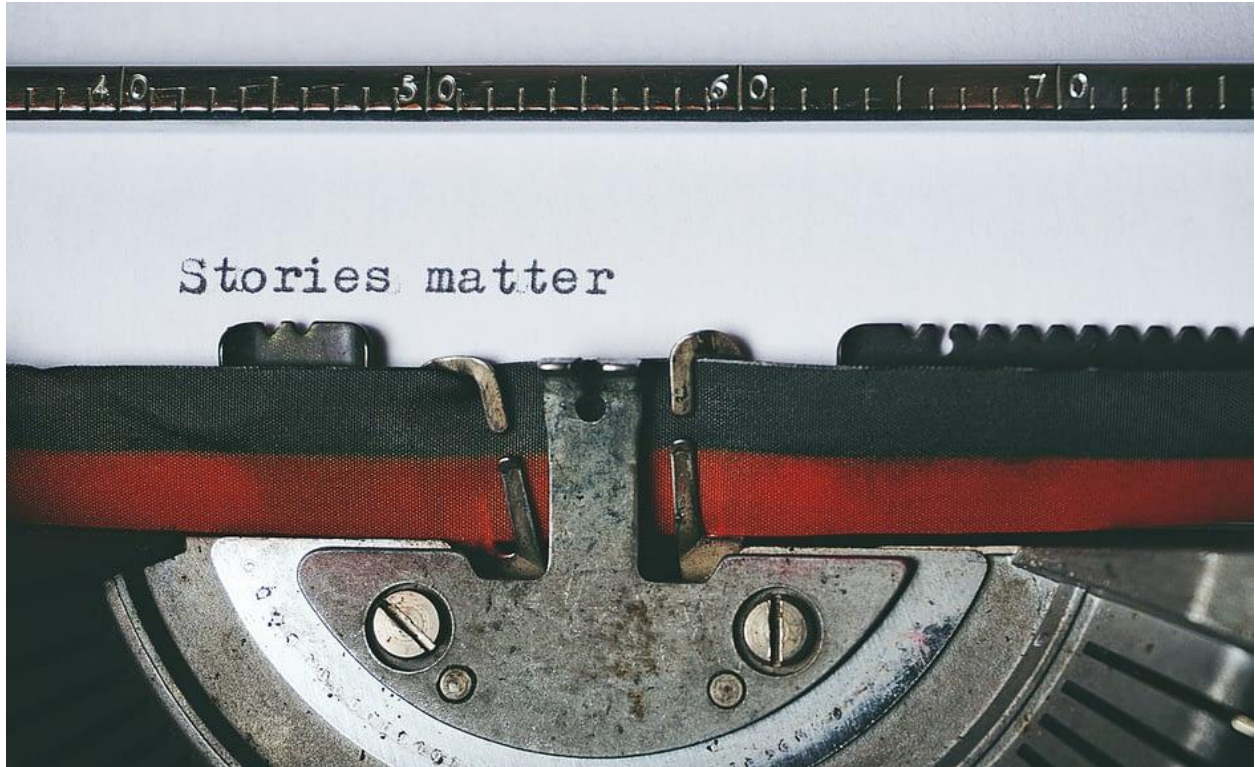
That's the communion aspect. We're equals. This is not an overdog/underdog thing, but it feels like that.

When I started in this work, I used to think- This was back in the reaction model of foundation work, which means we just sat back and received proposals.

We had to say no 19 times for every 20 times. I felt like I was in some sort of a version of the Holy of Holies, and they were sending their development officers up the stairs with a rope tied around their legs. You know, it was a problem.

It was horrible to be approached like that. It was horrible to create a circumstance where a development person needed to make an approach like that, so that's why we started inviting proposals and traveling and such.

So alignment, authenticity, and then communication, right? It sounds like you were saying communication.



### 3. Story

Steve: Well, really, one of the things in communication is story, so when you're a development officer, one thing that really will connect the person you're engaging with are authentic stories, not anecdotal stories, but, like, real stories.

So one thing, if you've watched Rob's podcast, he talks about the loving action, you know, and then we're the donor over here, and there's a huge chasm in between, and how do you help bridge that gap?

So those stories, if told well, if thought out, really will reinforce and help me understand what you're asking me to fund and ultimately the end, the impact that it's gonna have 'cause that's what we care about.

It's not buying shiny things. It's not about building a building or buying a sewing machine or whatever, you know.

It's about the people that God wants us to love, that he said to put our money toward, you know, helping, and then, you know, that opens the door for opportunity to share the Gospel, so it's that loving action we wanna know.

Rob: You're liable not to find this at every major donor or foundation institution, but at First Fruit, we've drilled it into ourselves that once we've invited a proposal, we become a volunteer at the table, and we try to help you be as articulate and as authentic as you can be in the preparation of your proposal because we want that to come through to the board so that they can see for themselves.

Steve: Though Rob, it's also important to me as a program officer because you know, we talked about doing strategic granting, grants that actually do bring change, and the stories are how I learned, you know, whether it's through story or travel, is how I see our granting actually moving something forward or, you know, raising the tide, or whatever you wanna call it, and without that, I'm kind of rudderless. I don't necessarily see the end results or the change, so stories are really important.

Rob: Well, and the other point here is is when you have this alignment, then you have a partnership that fulfills aims for both sides, ours to get money working on behalf of children, and theirs to get some payroll so that they can do the work on behalf of children.

I mean, that's really what it comes down to. Okay, and then...



## 4. Faithful Communication

Steve: But yeah, then that last thing we wanted to talk about was faithful communication.

And I, what I'm often shocked with is I'll do a grant, or mult, two grants or three, and I'm really excited about the work, and I'm, you know, following you on Instagram or whatever, you know, and I'll have little check-ins.

But I don't, maybe I'll call it the lonely syndrome or whatever, but I never hear back from you. Like, a whole year can go by, and I never hear from you, and I'm often scratching my head.

I'm like, I'm a, now, I will refer to myself as a checkbook here. I'm a willing checkbook, right? Or I'm willing, I'm like, "Give me, give me some opportunities. I'm excited about this," and I get crickets on the other side, and I'm often just frustrated by the lack-

I feel a little bit used, if you will, or sidelined because there's no communication, and I want that communion of giving and receiving.

I wanna be, I mean, I'm blessed when I hear and learn about your organization through stories and understand how our grants have helped you achieve what God's called you to do as well.

And when I get nothing back, I'm like, "Do I not matter in this relationship at all?" But I bet you, they will call me when they want money again.

Rob: Well, I've been on both sides of the table. I've been doing fundraising and fund-giving for, like I said, lots of years, and I've helped people think through.

And if you look at all the work that we're doing through this institute, through the Global Institute of Learning and other things that these podcasts are serving, it's to help people who have not run development efforts learn what's required.

And it baffled me in the, it baffles me in this work, on this faithful communication one, and the reason it baffles me is when I was fundraising, and I needed to make payroll in order to keep the mission going, in order to save the lives that were on the street that we were attempting to help with a meal, you know, safety, whatever, I had a fear of poverty. I was working all the time on the funding.

You know, and it wasn't that I was being rude; at least, I hope I wasn't. It's just I was, I know that a donor takes five or six reminders to make a single gift over 18 months, major donors, foundations.

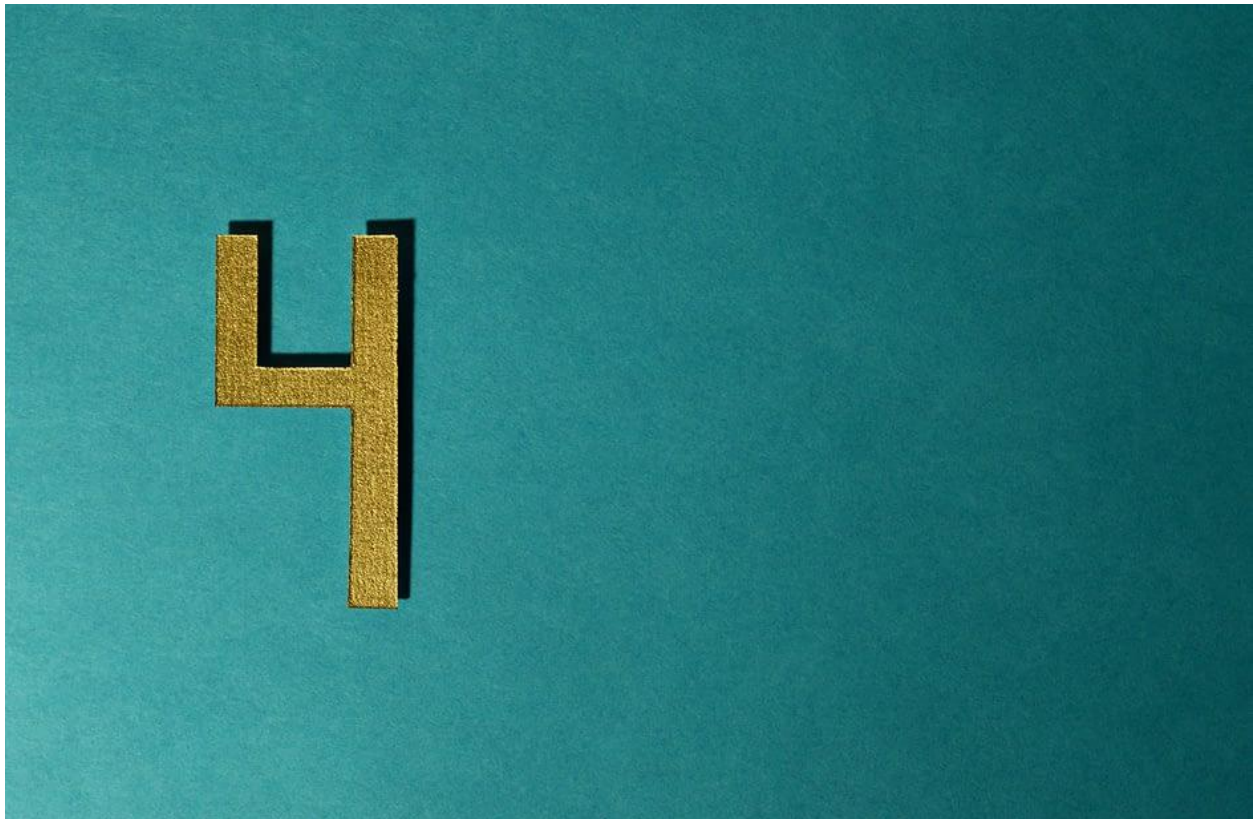
What Steve is referring to here is the ones that fail at their task are the ones that already have a giver and aren't nurturing that giver.

It's the third part of fundraising. [Discovery's the first part](#), figuring out who you're gonna fundraise from. [Acquisition is the second part](#), figuring out how to get them to actually give the money, how to present a program that's authentic to you that's also authentic to them, which is what Steve was saying, and then third, how do you communicate?



Where's the communion of giving and receiving? Where's the concern for each other? Where's the recognition of equality at the cross?

Money does not make the difference between us. It's only a commodity. It's something we use. It's not the difference-maker.



## Closing Thoughts

Rob: And so the four things that Steve looks at, and we're gonna wrap this up here, but we'll do another one or two with Steve, get some more insights, is Steve, the four things you look for are alignment, authenticity, story, and faithful communication.

Steve: Right.

Rob: Yeah, that aligns with the [four things that I have talked about in these podcasts](#) and that I look for.

The first thing I look for is purpose. It's the same word that Steve's using here is an alignment. It's an alignment of our purposes.

The second thing I look at is your character. That's what Steve is saying about authenticity.

Do you tell the truth? Are you courageous? Are you unafraid of the truth? Are you able to express your needs in a way that you're offering people to invest in your work; you're not begging them to give you money? 'Cause begging is not part of our game, and fundraising is not begging.

And then third was the story, and that is how well organized are you at communicating what you do? And there's a lot in that, and we have done a lotta podcasts on story and other things, so there's good materials available there.

There's good materials available everywhere on story. Just remember the one thing, that the story isn't about you.

It's about the loving action that's accomplished by what you do, and that's the story, and then people learn who you are by watching the effect of it on whoever the story's about.

And then lastly, you're looking for faithful communication, which is, in the parlance of the training that we're doing through these podcasts and in the book, is called nurture.

How do you nurture the relationships to fullness that you already have? And that's the insane part that Steve and I don't get, is once you've already got it, keep it up!

Steve will tell you if you're pushing too much. He will just say it directly to you. We all will. "No, you gotta wait a year," or, "My board, last time we talked about your ministry, said they wanted to take a pause."

You have to say things like that sometimes, or you say, "Actually the board loved what you're doing. Let's look at some more stuff."

And when I was in Steve's work, I had those kinda meetings every day, one or the other: gotta say no, gotta say yes, and so faithful communication's important. Steve, any final words, and then we'll sign off.

Steve: Well, what I was gonna say just to add to that too, remember, like, I'm also working with a budget.

I don't have a bottomless pit of money that we're trying to give out. It's actually, you know, a constrained amount, and so I'm always looking at way more opportunities than I get to give to.

So just because I say no does not mean you're not doing good work, God's work, any of that. It's just, you know, I've had to go through this process, and outcome, outcome and all.

Rob: Yeah, and I'm glad you brought that up because if you look in our podcast list, you'll find one about why foundations say no, and you can go even into that one deeper.

Steve: Right.

Rob: Steve, thank you today for this, for sharing, and we'll hope to see you again.

This is a podcast sponsored by [\*When Money Goes on Mission: Fundraising and Giving in the Twenty-First Century\*](#) by Moody, available in e-book, in, well, all of the sources, and we just thank you for being a part of this.

First Fruit thanks you, and we'll see you next time. Take care.