



Reflections on Philanthropy

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As the year end approaches, many family foundations are identifying any final donations to the charitable causes they support for the year. Certain special family offices with which we have been blessed to work can easily describe the mission, vision and values behind their philanthropy for next generations. But that is not always the case. More often than not, part of our consultation helps them discover the nature of their donor legacy as we film them communicating it to next generations.

In the majority of cases, the estate plan of the elders includes a generous gift to the family foundation upon their death. We are asked regularly by the next generation if we can find out in our discovery process how their Mom or Dad gives to charitable causes each year: what is the rationale or principle that inspires their philanthropy? In other words, it is not always clear. They seek understanding and guidance for that time in the future when their elders will not be available to consult. Through our donor interview process, we determine what was the mission when they first established the foundation and the values with which it is administered as well as naturally, their vision for its future. Through our

questions and some reflection, we often uncover the whys and the hows based on which the family philanthropy is enacted.

For example, one family office we have worked with has the following story:

We were hired by the 40-50 year old children of a 73 year-old, second-generation family business owner to capture his legacy. The business was started by their grandfather 85 years earlier. Just before filming him, I contacted the next-gens as we always do, to ask if there were any questions they would like me to ask that I could weave into our scripted questions. They could either remain anonymous or declare whose question it was and pose it to their father while being filmed.

A question surfaced from the eldest daughter who asked, "Why does our family foundation give a \$100,000 donation each year to Juvenile Diabetes Foundation when none of us or our children (his grandchildren) suffer from the disease?"

After two days of filming all the stories of his life and the business history, I had the chance to ask the question as part of the donor legacy interview on the foundation. The response on camera was astounding. Here this stoic, poised man took a deep breath, his eyes welled up in tears, and his voice cracked as he recounted the following:

He was born in the Depression era of the early 1930's. His father died when he was a toddler, and his mother died of heart problems when he was 17 years old. While mourning her death, he found out from relatives that she had lost her first child—a boy born three years before him and who died when he was just an infant—due to juvenile diabetes (at that time there was no cure for the disease). He was shocked, as he had



always thought he was the eldest—his mother had never spoken of this child. His relatives recounted that after that loss she was never the same, and likely died so young due to a broken heart.

He started working in the family business and vowed from his first paycheck that he would donate a certain percentage to help find a cure for juvenile diabetes so that no other mother would face the tragic loss of a young child to that disease. And that is why the foundation gave every year to that cause.

Our crew was spellbound, we all had to wipe away the tears streaming down our faces. We all understood the power of that story, now preserved for generations to come.

When the children saw the production some time later, there was a complete sense of surprise, shock and tears flowed once again. They had never met their grandmother since she died before he was even married. After learning about this story, they called a family foundation board meeting to change the by-laws to include that every year going forward a certain percentage would always be donated to Juvenile Diabetes, in honor of their grandmother, and father.

This knowledge of family history was very powerful for the family to uncover. Firstly, a long lost family secret was revealed with a wonderful and honorable donor legacy of this patriarch. And secondly, it bonded the family going forward in their philanthropic mission; they felt the need to commit to giving to that cause in posthumous honor.

Another family we were lucky to work with described through their donor legacy interviews on-camera what they wished for their descendants. One of their children (now 50) had suffered from leukemia as a child and nearly died. From that time on, their belief was to donate as much as possible to medical research institutes searching for cures for childhood cancer because as the matriarch declared on camera, "if you cure a child of cancer, you give them a whole lifetime". Once again, when the adult children saw their parents reflect this way, they were

extremely moved. They vowed that even though they lived all over the country, they would each donate to childhood cancer-related causes in their own communities to honor their parent's legacy.

Storytelling from elders to next-generations regarding donor advice, intent and legacy is priceless once recorded, as it becomes a blueprint for the continued success of a family philanthropy. Has your family office recorded in some way the mission, values and vision of your philanthropy? We highly recommend the task, as the future generations of a family will love to receive that guidance and wisdom, and maybe even the secrets that could deeply influence how they live - and give.

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