

Musings for May

These musings for nonprofits and foundations investing in them are the personal views of Institute President Hal Williams. Feel free to comment at hwilliams@rinstitute.org.

1. Moving the Needle.

Foundations and nonprofit organizations want to make a difference. We want to “move the needle” on a problem by significantly decreasing those who have it.

To make that happen, we focus on the numerator—those that we can help. If that number gets high enough we speak of our high impact. The real question, however, is the denominator. If we help 200 persons out of 500, that’s a huge change. If we help 200 out of 10,000 it is not.

To move the needle, limit your terrain. Chunk the area served or the definition of those you served into more bite sized portions. You won’t do less by this approach—you’ll just see more results from each mouthful!

Another advantage of starting with a smaller base is that you can better concentrate. We speak of programs having enough intensity and duration to make a difference. Going deep is made possible by not also trying to go too wide.

2. Advancing Innovation.

Foundations wisely separate improving lives from advancing innovation, given that the payloads are different. On the one hand we focus on the yield of direct human gain. On the other we focus on discovering new or greatly improved approaches that will create more gain long term than redoubling efforts with present content.

A second difference is in the factors that predict success. Listen to this first entry in our article called “Assumptions for Innovation”:

Innovation generally comes from individuals rather than from books, budgets, committees or other sources. *Innovation does not happen simply because an organization removes barriers presumed to prevent it. Innovation occurs when individuals are found and enabled to practice innovative behavior.*

If you want to innovate, start with an innovator. A passion or even an outrage at the way things now work is a far better springboard than is a complaisant outlook. And don’t push for practicality too quickly. No innovation is at first blush realistic.