



FINDING THE RIGHT CAUSE

Gratitude, a lifelong passion, helping others, sharing knowledge and experience: the motives and goals for philanthropic engagement are highly individualised.



“I am an emotional person who can hardly bear suffering. When I see this, I feel obliged to help. In my life I’ve been so lucky, which I like to share with others who haven’t had as many opportunities.”

“We have always been very analytical and want to know objectively where the need is greatest, then invest our funds there. We don’t want to rely on gut decisions, we want to know exactly what we have done and where.”



How do people get involved in philanthropy?

The motives for becoming involved in philanthropy are as diverse as the people themselves; some become active for a specific reason – after overcoming an illness or in the face of a crisis. Others pursue a long-held passion with their commitment, for which they now finally have time.

Some feel a sense of responsibility and want to “give something back” but are unsure where and how to start in a meaningful way. Others find themselves in a familial philanthropic tradition that they grew up with.

Approaches to philanthropy

Many donors come to philanthropy as a result of a formative experience – an illness they have overcome, the loss of a loved one, a lasting impression on a trip or a conversation with an inspiring personality. In this way, an interest in a topic and a desire to contribute or help others often arise.

For others, the conviction to get involved in a particular issue arises from a longer process of experience or learning. The scientist researching climate protection, the engineer who has spent a long time working on a technical problem, the teacher who wants to change the education system after years of teaching, or the entrepreneur who wants to pass on his decades of experience in leading organisations and people, are examples of this.

Some of the largest donations in the world stem from an advantageous position. A self-made or inherited fortune puts the patron in a position to support art, culture or science with a donation – sometimes combined with a desire to leave something lasting. Many a museum and lecture hall refer to their donors by their name.

Other philanthropists, looking back on their successful lives, feel a sense of thankfulness responsibility and want to contribute something meaningful to society without a passion for a particular subject. For them, it is sometimes more about the “how” than the “what”, for example by deciding to support particularly efficient programmes and projects or to support social entrepreneurs in building up their organisations.

Finding out about one’s own motivation

If you understand your own motivation well, it is easier for you to find the form of engagement that suits you best.

Most philanthropists are united by the desire to achieve something meaningful with their commitment. Each of them associates something different with this expectation – this diversity is a characteristic of philanthropy and one of its great strengths. At the same time, they want to achieve personal satisfaction through their commitment and be clear about when they feel their contribution has been successful.

Often philanthropists are confronted with questions they cannot easily answer: to which issue (environment, health, etc) do you want to contribute to and how, in which region (your own city, country), and who should be supported (children, sick people...)?

There is no right or wrong here, nor is there an objective hierarchy of social needs that the philanthropist is expected to fulfil. One has to distinguish between objective needs and what one perceives as meaningful. This is why the term meaningful is often used in philanthropy.

While philanthropy experts identify urgent needs and propose effective solutions for them, the question of what one feels is meaningful can only be answered by oneself. A music lover may want to enable children to learn an instrument because he himself has been touched by music, while a doctor seeks opportunities for medical help for those in need because he can empathise with their suffering and wants to alleviate it.

Interesting, but not uncontroversial, is the approach of the Effective Philanthropy movement, which attempts a certain objectification of social concerns – if a donation has a tenfold greater effect abroad than on one’s doorstep, then the representatives of this school of thought see a moral obligation to use funds as effectively as possible.

In the end, it remains the philanthropist’s own personal decision, which he has to legitimise to himself.

Understanding one’s own values

People long for meaning. When one’s needs are met, questions arise about the meaning and purpose of life – and about what one’s own contribution to the world can be. Questioning one’s own motives, examining one’s own commitment – alone or with others – is an opportunity for many philanthropists to reflect on their own values. It is not unusual for priorities to be rearranged in the process.

Many philanthropists experience this as a gratifying process in which their personality continues to mature and their conviction to stand up for what is right is strengthened. Others discover commonalities with, or differences from, the beliefs of their family members and experience profound discussions for which there would otherwise have been no occasion.

Doing good – but how?

A typical stage of the philanthropic journey is the realisation that one does not know enough about a subject close to their heart, or that they do not know all the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of support well enough to make a well informed decision on a course of action.

Then it becomes time to seek competent advice, because what is well meant is often not so easily well executed. The more precisely the donor can describe his or her concerns, the more effective the start of the advisory process.

It is not uncommon for the original foundation of the planned commitment to change during the process, and even many experienced philanthropists question their previous approach from time to time. Reflecting on one’s own commitment and re-positioning it is also an expression of creative philanthropic freedom.

Founders and philanthropists pursue different, and sometimes several, goals with their commitment. While some are primarily concerned with making a social difference or solving a problem, others focus on the act of giving itself. They enjoy the gratitude and the warm feeling of having done something good.

For others, it is also important to know exactly how their support is having an impact: how many people have been reached, what exactly has changed, and how a supported organisation has handled the funds.

Endowing and donating is a highly personal act. Some philanthropists impose strict rules on themselves or their foundation to select recipients for grants and decide on funding. Others prefer to make decisions on a situational or spontaneous basis or trust their gut feeling.

Those who attach particular importance to achieving good as effectively as possible are usually well advised to develop a coherent concept for their own commitment or to seek professional guidance in doing so.

However, there is also room in philanthropy for spontaneous decisions that are rather guided by emotions; not everything has to be planned in a formal manner. That said, it makes sense to adapt one's own expectations of effectiveness or transparency to the approach.

Stick or Twist?

Almost all philanthropists experience one or more moment of uncertainty during their philanthropic journey. Is the issue they have chosen really the most relevant? Have they chosen the right partners and organisations? Are they giving too much or too little, too early or too late in life?

Some then seek advice from experts and advisors, others from other philanthropists or among friends and family. Still others prefer to settle these questions alone.

Many donors and philanthropists find these phases of pausing and reflection challenging, because what they have come to love and are used to is called into question. Once convincing answers have been found, the philanthropic journey can then continue with greater confidence and security.

Finding your own way

Causes, motives and manifestations of philanthropic engagement are as diverse as people themselves. Rarely does the philanthropic journey run smoothly and without complication. The willingness to critically reflect on one's own actions from time to time and to adjust them if necessary, is an important contribution to the long-term satisfaction of donors and philanthropists.

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