

Acts of Commission

Lessons from an Informal Study

Janice Nittoli

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Discussion Guide

Introduction

This discussion guide is designed to help you think through the concepts presented in Janice Nittoli's paper, *Acts of Commission: Lessons from an Informal Study*, and consider how you might apply them in the everyday practice of philanthropy. The guide contains four exercises:

- The first exercise provides a role-play to explore the match between a commission strategy and foundation goals and mission.
- The second exercise presents a template to plan a commission's membership, and assure that it contains a balanced and diverse group of decisionmakers.
- The third exercise involves creating a "History of the Future" to identify the combination of elements that lead to a successful commission.
- The fourth exercise offers a series of questions to help a foundation staff person prepare to work with a media consultant to promote a commission's work.

Following the exercises, a resource page contains Nittoli's checklist to help funders assess their readiness to launch a policy commission.

Exercise 1: Congruence Between Foundation and Commission Goals

Goal: To understand and explore the interests of diverse foundation stakeholders in order to ensure that a commission enacts the strategic goals and mission of a foundation.

Before establishing a commission, it is critical for foundation sponsors to articulate their objectives carefully, and assure that they are synchronized with the foundation's mission and strategic goals. In this exercise,

three to six participants (or pairs of participants) jointly choose a topic for a potential policy commission, and are assigned roles as foundation trustees, foundation executives, or foundation staff members passionate about the policy topic for which the commission may be established.

From their various vantage points, the participants discuss the questions listed below. Before doing so, they spend a few minutes jotting down their own thoughts about the questions.

Discussion questions:

- What are the goals of the commission? What do you hope it will achieve for the foundation?
- How do the goals of the commission jibe with the foundation's mission and program areas? Does the foundation want to build its capacity in the policy area to be addressed by the commission?
- How would the commission serve the objectives of one or more of the foundation's existing or planned program areas? Which are the top two program areas?
- Who are the champions within the foundation who could benefit from the work yielded by the commission?

Exercise 2: Commission Membership

Goal: To examine the composition of a commission and assure that it is made up of a bipartisan, cross-section of diverse individuals who have the authority and responsibility to make decisions and shape policy.

Commission members play a powerful role in establishing the profile of a commission and facilitating its goals. In this exercise a group or individuals suppose(s) that their foundation is establishing a commission on a significant policy issue. Participants (as a group or individually) complete the worksheet below by noting the names of individuals they would want to involve and the special attributes they would bring to the effort.

Discussion questions:

- Who would you select to serve on the commission? How many members would you want to include? Who should chair the commission?
- What message does the selection of the chair or co-chairs send? What message is sent by the membership as a whole? (For example, the Carnegie Corporation appointed Clark Kerr as chair right after Governor Ronald Reagan had dismissed him as

head of the University of California systems. Kerr’s appointment signaled the commission’s independence.) Will the selection of the chair or co-chairs gain attention, and what message will the selection send?

- How would the strengths and leadership styles of the commission members match the goals of the commission (for example, educating the public, solving problems, and/or mobilizing support for recommendations)?
- How would you predict the media will respond to the group? How will the board respond? Is the board prepared for media attention, both positive and negative?
- Who might feel excluded from the group? What will it take to keep potentially high-powered individuals on the commission engaged and working effectively as a group?
- What management issues would you expect to arise with this group? How would you handle them?

Names of potential commissioners				
Technical knowledge/ special skills (e.g., media savvy)				
Represents key perspectives or constituencies (e.g., organized labor)				
Standing in the field				
Disposition to openness				
Position as an influential generalist (has a reputation for getting things done, can garner attention)				
Listener, persuader, synthesist, solution-oriented				
Willing to prepare and study the issues, respects data				

Exercise 3: History of the Future

Goal: To identify the elements that will make a commission successful by telling the story of its success as if it has already happened. The exercise stimulates creativity about what is possible and surfaces a group's assumptions about what it will take to be successful.

CFAR (the Center for Applied Research in Philadelphia) has created the history of the future technique to help people explore possible paths for new initiatives. The exercise works best in a group, but can also be done by individuals. Participants project themselves into the future, and imagine that they have sponsored a successful policy commission. They then reflect on the factors that made the commission so effective.

First, participants are assigned to one of two groups. One group will be the panel that tells the story of the success from some point in the future. The second group, which can be an individual or a few people, has the role of pulling the story out of the panel, asking questions that probe what worked. Before starting, the first group is given time to think about the story they want to tell, while the second group thinks about the questions they want to ask. The discussion should cover the following elements:

- Choice of a commission strategy. (Sample question: Why was a commission the best tool to promote the issue at hand?)
- Goals and charge of the commission. (What did the press release say about the project?)
- Composition and structure. (Thinking of Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*, Little, Brown and Company 2000, who were the Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople on the commission? Connectors know many people in different worlds and niches and link them to each other; Mavens are information specialists, sharing and trading what they know; and Salespeople are persuaders.)
- Staffing. (Who was the director of the commission? Did you choose a foundation staff person?)
- Research agenda. (What were the five things you wanted to learn about through the commission? Whom did you call upon to help you answer these questions?)
- Recommendations. (Who was in agreement with the recommendations? Why? With which ones?)
- Media strategy. (How did *The New York Times* cover the commission? Did the articles frame your issue in the way you

intended? When you presented the commission's findings to the press, who was with you on stage?)

- Foundation management. (How did your board react to the commission's work? What irritated them the most? Which program officer felt stepped on by the commission?)
- Budget and timeline. (Was the commission adequately funded?)
- Follow up after the commission's work was concluded. (How did policy move as a result of the commission's work? Which policymakers and constituencies were pleased by the report? Who were the most vocal critics and what did they have to say?)
- What made this commission so successful?
- What was the moment you knew you were really on the right track?

Next, the interview of the panel takes place. The panelists are asked to build on each other's stories in the moment. Then the whole group debriefs, and discusses:

- How realistic was the story?
- What surprised you?
- How can you translate the story to planning for a commission?

Exercise 4: Media

Goal: To assist in preparing to use a media consultant to build public support for a commission's agenda and recommendations.

Media strategy is one of the most important factors in a commission's success, yet it is routinely under-funded or ignored in commission budgets. In this exercise, a group or an individual selects a topic for a potential policy commission and imagines hiring an external media firm to assist with the project. In preparing for the first meeting with the consultant, participants consider the following issues:

- How early in the commission process would you bring in the consultant?
- How would you explain the foundation's objective and message for the policy issue to be addressed?
- How does the media currently treat this issue?

- How does the public perceive the problem? To what extent is the issue seen as a priority, a matter of public policy and ready for resolution?
- How should your issue be framed (or reframed) to capture the public imagination?
- How would you manage the media firm as it works with the foundation and commission?

Resource: Readiness to Establish a Commission

In her research, Nittoli discovered that the success of a policy commission depends in large part on a funder’s preparedness to take on the tasks of forming and guiding the commission. For a commission to contribute to policy change, the funder must take an active role in the commission’s work—before, during, and after the tenure of its members. Nittoli’s analysis suggests that commissions are more likely to be successful and effective if the foundations that sponsor them can answer yes to six critical questions.

Yes	No	
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	1. Do you know where your issue “sits in the policy lifespan?” Commissions are most useful at defining an invisible issue or solving a problem that is being actively debated.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	2. Do you understand both how the media frame your issue and how the public interprets it? It is especially important with social issues to understand not only how visible the issue is, but the extent to which the matter is seen as a policy problem, as opposed to a matter of personal or family responsibility.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	3. Do you have the staff, budget, and willingness to do advance research and describe your issue? This may be research to get a handle on the facts and paint a portrait of current conditions, or research to analyze competing alternative solutions, or both.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	4. Are you prepared stay on top of the commission’s design and operations for the life of its work? A tightly focused commission is one that is presented with well-framed, data-driven decisions whose formulation requires significant staff and sponsor management. Before investing in a commission, a foundation sponsor needs to know what it wants to accomplish in the way of policy change, understand how the commission’s work links to and extends the foundation’s other program areas and investments, and be prepared to dedicate the staff and financial resources to seeing it through.

Yes

No

5. Will you actively plan the communications strategy for the commission's work while that work is ongoing? Funders should think about how to share early findings and data that can signal the foundation's interest and perspective on the issue. They should proactively focus (or reframe) public attention on the matter. And they must consistently keep the issues in the public eye by releasing research findings or policy solutions that support the commission's message.

6. Are you prepared to address the requirements for implementation at the same time the policy commission is formulating solutions? This requires thinking concretely about your recommendations and the kinds of financial and staff investments they will demand, for example, in media outreach, public education, and coalition-building.