

mmt

Meyer Memorial Trust



Doug Stamm is the chief executive officer of Meyer Memorial Trust (MMT), one of the Pacific Northwest's biggest and most innovative funders. Before joining MMT in 2002, Doug was an executive at Nike, Inc., and then the executive director of Friends of the Children's national organization. MMT's mission is to "invest in people, ideas and efforts that deliver significant social benefit to Oregon and southwest Washington." They operate in fields as diverse as social services, health, affordable housing, community development, conservation, arts and culture, and education. MMT co-funded this issue of Sockeye Magazine devoted to youth development.



Sockeye's Executive Editor Jay Hutchins and Guest Forum Editor Cynthia King-Guffey sat down with Doug to talk about the approach MMT takes in addressing the needs of young people in Oregon and southwest Washington. Visit the Meyer Memorial Trust website at www.mmt.org for details on their work.

King-Guffey: Doug, what role do you think Meyer Memorial Trust has in positively impacting life in the Pacific Northwest?

Stamm: In taking this position at MMT, one thing I have come to appreciate about Fred Meyer is how ahead of his time he was in how he ran his company. Even in the 1920s, he very genuinely had a spirit of innovation and an entrepreneurial attitude: Customers came first. Top needs were addressed. He set out to create an atmosphere where ideas were embraced. So I've been trying to model our foundation's approach on those core values, both internally and in how we relate to the organizations we support.

We want to be known as a model regional foundation. We want to make things better in Oregon and southwest Washington, to be a catalyst in building the capacity not only of individual organizations, but of the region. We are trying to push ourselves to come up with innovative ways to address challenges and opportunities.

Hutchins: For example?

Stamm: For example, we've tried to bring an open-source approach to the work that is taking place here. By doing our own extensive research in the field—for example, identifying state-of-the-art practices and ideas—and then sharing this knowledge freely and openly with those doing the work, we feel that we can strengthen both our own and our partners' intellectual capacity. That's why, for example, when we were developing our own "knowledge management" system, we decided to develop it for the whole nonprofit community, resulting in connectipedia (<http://connectipedia.org>).



Hutchins: How do you go about getting the right kind of knowledge to make good decisions?

Stamm: There isn't any way we could do this without our program officers who take an investigative approach both with the field generally, and then specifically with the organizations and projects that we potentially fund. They do significant and thorough due diligence on the organization, trying to understand its claims, its leadership (both the board and the staff), its values, the space that the organization occupies in its field, and how they are applying best practices within the organization itself. Part of our due diligence is to ask, "Does it make a difference?"

King-Guffey: So in this sense, you are acting as an investor in the organization and ask the same probing questions that a lot of venture funders ask.

Stamm: Yes, and as investors we also are asking high-level questions about the work and the field. Fred Meyer had a saying: "In all giving, give great thought." So we ask: What are the needs? Are there better ways to deliver this? Who is doing interesting work in this area? One of the ways we come at this is to wait for the best ideas to emerge. We look for model programs, experimental practices, emerging applications that we can test and support. The Wraparound pilot project is an example of that (*see Waller page 16*).

Hutchins: Can you talk more about how you decide what to support?

Stamm: We do look at objective outcomes—benchmarks such as school performance, drug and alcohol use. We look at longitudinal studies. If there are experts in the field, we go to them. We ask, "Is this study measuring the right outcomes?" and "What is their methodology?"

But we also know that not all outcomes can be measured. And then there is the human element. Not only does the idea need to be right, but the people involved need to have the kind of leadership and visionary skills that can make it work.

King-Guffey: Doug, what are your own indicators of success when it comes to youth?

Stamm: The big outcome for me personally is that I want to see our youth understanding and participating in democracy. By that, I don't just mean voting, but being an aware and active participant in your community (in your block, your school), that you are civically engaged and that you can engage in positive civil discourse.

One of the most important things that we could do to change values and behaviors would be to institute a mandatory civil service program. A national service-corps requirement would be good for our youth and would protect democratic ideals in our communities. 