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Book Review: Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count

Paul G. Putman
Cleveland Foundation

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Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count

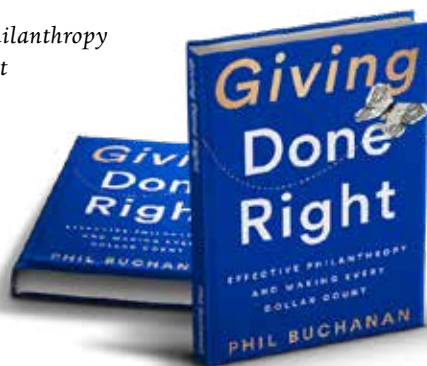
Reviewed by Paul G. Putman, Ph.D.

Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count

(2019) is grounded in the perspectives of author Phil Buchanan and his talented team at the Center for Effective Philanthropy, led by Buchanan since its founding in 2001. “This book,” he writes in the introduction, “is for givers at all levels who struggle with how to make the most difference.” While readers with a baseline of knowledge in the field may find the going a bit slow at the outset, they should persist. Think of the first few chapters as appetizers, providing a shared understanding of the table upon which organized philanthropy in the United States has been set and currently operates. The main course is an exploration of the art of giving.

Buchanan repeatedly reminds readers that philanthropy isn’t simple, and the guidance in *Giving Done Right* cannot be boiled down to a five-point checklist. While he does offer a typology of givers that would have provided an easy tease for the book jacket — “What type of giver are you? Turn to Chapter Four to find out!” — Buchanan eschews the click-bait approach in favor of an appeal to thoughtful givers, and the result is a highly accessible and useful read for those who want to “do it right.”

Early on, readers encounter Buchanan’s strong and insistent argument that approaching philanthropy from a business perspective is a prime example of “giving done wrong.” Revisited



Giving Done Right: Effective Philanthropy and Making Every Dollar Count by Phil Buchanan, PublicAffairs, 2019.
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throughout the book is his indictment of “a simplistic and erroneous narrative in which those in business have all the acumen and passion for results, and those working in the nonprofit sector are the problem.” Board members often come from corporate

backgrounds and, logically, tend to tackle problems with solutions derived from familiar principles. But Buchanan repeatedly rails against this pervasive line of thinking, and his text is sprinkled with pointed complaints. One favorite: “Those prophesying the happy merging of business and nonprofits into one sector-agnostic orgy of good-doing are often, as we’ve seen, faculty at

business schools.” He proclaims that “thoughtful givers and nonprofit leaders need to stand up and make clear that their work is uniquely challenging and requires its own approach and discipline.”

Even as he presents this and other critiques of the field, Buchanan is, naturally, encouraging and upbeat about the practice and promise of philanthropy. One real strength of *Giving Done Right* is its mix of voices from philanthropic and nonprofit leadership. Key takeaways from the first chapter’s brief introduction to nonprofits: organizations are different, they do not need to act like businesses, the sector does more than you think, and your support matters. Those may seem obvious to those who have worked in the field, and here the book’s intended audience appears to be givers who are unfamiliar

with nonprofits or whose views might be skewed by their misguided college business professors. Buchanan challenges some pervasive myths: that bigger is better, or that low overhead always equals a better-run organization. He urges readers to learn more about what they want to support and to be aware that giving to grassroots groups may be the best way to make a difference.

The author is at his best when describing nonprofit partners and sharing their stories. The heroes are those doing the work, and Buchanan — clearly a passionate champion of the sector — praises their efforts and exhorts individual and institutional funders to maximize their partnerships with these organizations. In the full chapter he devotes to selecting and working with nonprofits, he advises givers to find groups “that fit with their goals and strategies, are well-run and making a difference,” and that “might not be well-known.” Overall, he emphasizes the critically important need for givers to listen and discover what they don’t know.

The importance of clarity is underscored to great effect. “Too many givers aren’t clear on their goals. They can tell you the category of their giving ..., but they can’t tell you what they hope to achieve,” Buchanan warns. Appreciated was his reassurance that givers do not need a unique approach to have an impact: “Don’t be afraid to simply do what others do and align your goals with those of others you respect and admire.” And while Buchanan encourages a focused approach, he observes that “the challenge is to strike the right balance between the natural drift that tends to pull givers into too many areas with too many goals and a telescopic focus that misses the larger context in which a problem resides.” Here Buchanan provides readers with a nuanced overview of a philanthropic conundrum and encourages a balanced approach. Readers will either appreciate the balanced centrist guidance or long for him to have a more exacting opinion and advice.

Buchanan also explores the many ways to give; from giving circles to community foundations (which, he quips, are “the original giving circles”). Missing is any exploration of online-giving

platforms competing for the attention of givers; the medium is not the message here. He encourages givers to establish a budget, and to practice “conscious giving” as opposed to simply responding to a request. He also presents some additional avenues for givers, including advocacy work, communications, and alternative investing strategies. “Try to do the most good you can do,” he advises. Buchanan briefly missteps when he asserts that whatever inspires a giver to give makes the giving more effective. This reader was not convinced: The giver may be more passionate if strongly motivated by religious beliefs or personal pain, but effectiveness and passion are different constructs. Givers who are proximate to an issue can certainly more fully understand it, but depth of understanding does not necessarily lead to effective giving.

In an examination of goals, Buchanan offers an overview of the Effective Altruism movement and notes where his thinking diverges — in encouraging locally directed philanthropy and support for arts and culture. He discusses the benefits of giving that target root causes — solves versus salves — as well as the importance of “trimming branches.” Givers are cautioned to question any assumptions that they know best and are in a position to impose solutions: “The philanthropic road is littered with the carcasses of wildly successful business people who thought they’d be able to *single-handedly* address some stubborn social problem in the same time frame and with the same approach with which they made their millions or billions.”

In his discussion of strategic philanthropy, the issue for Buchanan is not strategy per se, but rather how it can be poorly conceived or implemented. Both, he clearly shows, often result when funders become enamored of an idea and impose it on those actually doing the work without involving them in the planning. Grantees need to be treated as partners, he emphasizes, and not mere executors of a plan delivered from on high. In this exploration of strategy and impact, Buchanan again dismisses deceptively easy certainties: “Here, again, it’s the business school professors and philanthropy consultants invoking business metaphors who led philanthropy astray.”

“Regardless of your focus, effective philanthropy requires both an understanding of the unique challenge of running a nonprofit and an awareness of the interdependent nature of problems. ... Most fundamentally, it requires a deep humility and a rejection of the prevailing conventional wisdom that analogizes nonprofits to businesses or giving to investing.”

– Phil Buchanan

In a section titled “Go Big or Go Home,” Buchanan assesses the call for more “big bets” in philanthropy with a bit of equivocation: “Sometimes big bets make sense. But, other times, what’s needed are little bets to test approaches – with bigger bets coming only when something has been shown to work.” He dismisses as pointless the debate over whether foundations should exist in perpetuity or spend down their endowments to address today’s urgent social challenges, arguing that the question should be considered in the context of funders’ specific goals and strategies.

Buchanan encourages support for strong impact assessment efforts among nonprofits; helping them “collect and learn from the data they believe will help them become more effective is arguably one of the best investments a giver can make.” He suggests givers ask three simple questions – whether stated priorities match actual giving is one – in an annual review of their support for nonprofit groups. If individual givers (heck – institutional funders, as well) seriously

reflected upon these questions, the field would make tremendous progress. But here again, Buchanan warns against simplistic approaches, examining a case in which a nonprofit serving the homeless employed a “cost-per-life-touched ratio” that didn’t factor into account the intensive nature of some program interactions and as a result actually favored those with more limited impact. He makes his point clearly: “There is no universal measure to allow for impact comparisons of nonprofit organizations working in different fields or with different populations, and there never will be.”

In this text, which is presented as a general guide for donors, Buchanan warns that “it’s important to be skeptical of the conventional wisdom found in most general guides for donors.” Readers are cautioned to resist the allure of the high-profile corporate figure providing a clear path to philanthropic success, and urged to follow advice from someone deeply rooted in the field. Depending on your perspective, this advice could be met with nods of agreement or dismissive headshakes.

Giving Done Right ends with an infographic presenting ten differences between ineffective and effective givers. While a fine list of items, this infographic belies the complexity of the ideas presented in this text. By its conclusion, *Giving Done Right* reads at times like an instructor’s guide to a master course on philanthropy. The inclusion of guiding questions makes the book immediately helpful to readers, but the practice of giving is not oversimplified just to make the concept easy for readers to digest. Buchanan has written a helpful yet not oversimplified guide to coach individual givers along their philanthropic journey. If readers do nothing more than create time and space to reflect upon the questions he poses, his efforts will be worthwhile. And, in Buchanan’s own words: “If this sounds like a lot of work, that’s because it is.”

Paul G. Putman, Ph.D., is donor relations & technology officer at the Cleveland Foundation and Adjunct Instructor at Baldwin Wallace University.