

FOUNDATION X

# How to Choose Causes that Align with Your Values

Choosing where to give seems like it should be simple, but for most people, it isn't.

**The challenge isn't about generosity. It's direction. And without clarity, even the best intentions can feel scattered.**

Most people start in the wrong place, looking outward at organizations before clarifying what matters to them. The result is uncertainty, second-guessing, and a sense that you might be missing something more meaningful.

The Internal Revenue Service lists almost 2 million nonprofits in the United States<sup>1</sup>. With that many options, it's easy to feel unsure where to begin, or whether you're overlooking something more urgent or impactful.

But the goal isn't to find the "best" cause. It's to find the right fit.

## Start With What Matters to You

Before choosing a cause, start by clarifying your own direction. This doesn't require a formal mission statement, just a clear understanding of what you care about and why.

**Start with a simple question: What feels meaningful to me, and why?** That often comes from a combination of experiences, interests, and values.

Think about what has shaped you:

- What kind of impact you want to have
- What problems you feel drawn to
- What experiences have shaped you

For most people, the answer comes from something close to home: **personal experiences, communities, or moments that stayed with them.** It might be something you've supported that left you feeling proud or fulfilled.

Sometimes it can be very straightforward. If you look back, certain interests tend to show up again and again:

- Sports or being part of a team
- Music, theater, or the arts
- Spending time outdoors
- Mentoring, teaching, or helping others

Those interests often translate into causes that still feel engaging now: youth sports programs, arts organizations, environmental work, or education or mentorship initiatives.

You don't need complete clarity to begin. You just need a starting point that feels worth exploring.

## How to Start Looking

Even once you know what you care about, whether that's animal welfare, education, healthcare, or something else, you'll still need to figure out **where to actually get involved**.

In practice, this becomes clear over time, by exploring a few organizations and paying attention to what resonates. People come across a few organizations, learn more about each, and gradually develop a sense of which ones feel like a better fit.

As you move through that process, some of the most helpful resources are already part of your everyday life.

### Start with a few practical steps:

- 1 Ask people you trust.** Friends, colleagues, or neighbors often have firsthand experience. A simple question like "Have you ever volunteered somewhere you liked?" can open the door to insights you wouldn't find on your own.
- 2 Use online tools as a starting point.** Platforms like Charity Navigator, VolunteerMatch, or Idealist can help you identify organizations and review basic information like mission, finances, and structure.
- 3 Evaluate how organizations present themselves.** Their website, emails, and social media can tell you a lot. Do they clearly explain what they do? Does their communication feel thoughtful and transparent?
- 4 Follow them for a short period of time.** Social media, newsletters, or updates can give you a sense of their day-to-day work, how they engage with their community, and what they prioritize over time.
- 5 Spend a little time in their world.** Attend an event, join a volunteer orientation, or stop by if appropriate. Being present, even briefly, can help you understand their culture and how they operate.

## How to Evaluate Organizations

As you explore organizations, use a simple set of questions to guide your decisions:

- 1 Do I understand what this organization actually does?**
- 2 Can I see how my time or money would be used?**
- 3 Do they seem clear about their goals and progress?**
- 4 Do the people involved come across as credible and thoughtful?**

A few questions will help you quickly see which organizations are worth exploring further.

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## Test Before You Commit

People rarely figure this out by thinking. They figure it out by doing.

A small step is usually enough to begin:

- Volunteer once or twice before committing more regularly**
- Make a smaller gift before deciding to give more**
- Attend an event just to see what it's like**

Throughout this, certain organizations will stand out to you. Some experiences will feel more meaningful than others. Over time, you'll notice where your time and resources seem to make a difference and where you feel most connected.

The good news is that generosity is a lifelong journey. Direction becomes clearer through experience.



### **It Should Feel Good, Too**

One of the most overlooked signals: how it feels. Giving shouldn't feel like another obligation. It can be something you look forward to.

The kind of giving that tends to stick is the kind that feels energizing—where you enjoy the people, the environment, or the sense of contribution. When it feels good, you're far more likely to stay engaged.

That might look like being part of a community you wouldn't otherwise be connected to, learning something new, or seeing the impact of your generosity firsthand.

### **Bringing It Together**

Choosing where to give isn't about finding a perfect answer. It's about starting, paying attention, and refining over time.

If you simplify the process, it comes down to three things:

- 1 Start with what feels personal.**
- 2 Take a step, even if it's small.**
- 3 Pay attention to what feels right and stays with you.**

Over time, your approach to generosity can evolve to reflect your experiences, priorities, and values. That's what will make it sustainable, meaningful, and impactful to you.

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#### Sources

1. Internal Revenue Service. Tax Exempt Organization Search (TEOS). <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/tax-exempt-organization-search>