# The Awesome Foundation
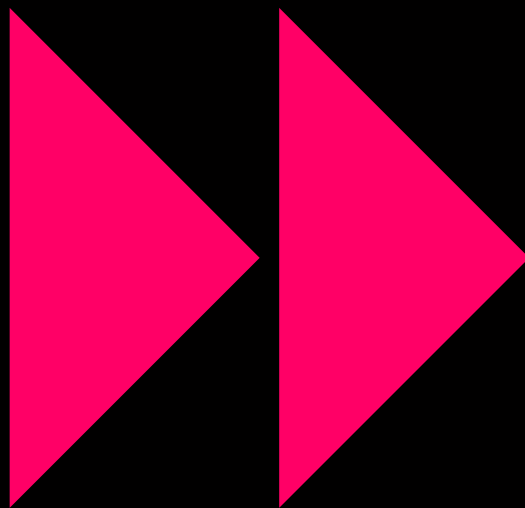# New Chapter Handbook

# Introduction

Greetings! You have received this booklet because you are interested in starting an Awesome Foundation chapter, or are curious to learn how we do what we do.

We are thrilled at the possibility of having you aboard! Since we started in 2009, Awesome Foundation chapters have given away more than $1.4 million and our community has grown to more than 100 chapters around the world. As we look to the future, we are actively seeking out new chapters, and new opportunities to make awesome happen.

You hold in your hand (or on your screen) the collective knowledge of many years of grant giving and supporting general awesomeness. Still, while we encourage you to review this document, you should always remember that the Awesome Foundation is entirely volunteer-based, and has no central officiating body. That means you have a lot of flexibility!

In fact, you will find the Awesome Foundation to be unlike most traditional grant-making bodies. Don't expect lots of paper work and red tape! Many chapters are simply a few folks passing on some cash to encourage another person to pursue their awesome idea. No hassle. No fuss. Lots of trust and love.

We hope you will find this document useful. If you have any feedback on it, please don't hesitate to get in touch with the new chapters team at join@awesomefoundation.org.

# What is the Awesome Foundation?

**Mission**
Forwarding the interest of awesome in the universe, $1,000 at a time.

**In Practice**
We are a global, distributed network of individuals experimenting with simple, lightweight funding structures that foster the creation of surprise and delight.

**Organizationally**
Each chapter in the Awesome Foundation community operates entirely independently: there is no actual organization "in charge" of the Awesome Foundation. We are not a real foundation at all!

# How does it work?

At its core, the Awesome Foundation is very simple. An Awesome Foundation chapter consists of a group of ten or more "micro-trustees" who make all the decisions and are responsible for guiding the chapter. When they join, trustees make two key commitments:

1. To contribute funds, usually every month, to form a single $1,000 grant to forward the interest of awesome in the universe (n.b., all amounts in this document are based on a $1,000 standard, but denominations and currency depend on the location of the chapter).

2. To participate fully in the monthly grant selection process of the chapter.

Potential grantees submit their awesome ideas through the application form at awesomefoundation.org. These are then viewable by trustees. Trustees determine which project to fund, and the $1,000 is distributed accordingly.

Chapters are set up geographically, although applicants can apply from anywhere in the world. While specifying a chapter to apply to is not necessary (all chapters can view the applications received in the "any" pool), most chapters primarily fund projects submitted locally.

## How do I start a chapter?

If you are reading this, chances are you have already done this, but just in case, your first step should be to e-mail join@awesomefoundation.org. A volunteer from an existing chapter will respond to your inquiry, and can help answer any questions you have after reading this document.

Beyond that, starting a chapter is pretty simple: you gather ten trustees committed to participating, and then you are pretty much good to go. But please keep reading!

## Where do I find trustees?

Many people starting a chapter will gather a few friends to form an initial base of trustees, and put out an open call to fill the remaining slots.

Some advice here: the powerful thing about the Awesome Foundation is that it creates a meeting point for many local communities that would otherwise not be connected. Each of the trustees also plays a role in promoting the chapter, and the type of applications a chapter receives will be at least partially dependent on the composition of the group.

The global awesome community can also help a new chapter add trustees. Across existing chapters, it is likely that someone knows a person who would be great for the chapter you are trying to start.

Many people starting chapters discover that

there are more people interested in serving as trustees than there are trustee spots, and consider increasing the number of spots accordingly. This is fine, but remember that keeping the trustee count low makes it easier to build a tight-knit community and to reach consensus around funding a project each month.

If you are having some trouble finding trustees, here are some tips that have helped other chapters in the past:

*It can take time* – While some chapters organize quickly, others have taken as long as six months to a year to gather all the trustees together. Don't give up! And, take the time to find the right people—with such a small group, having a fun dynamic of people who genuinely like to spend time with each other is a key part of

having a successful chapter. You'll also find that many of the people who initially said no will come back once the chapter gets off the ground.

*Natural friends* – There are certain organizations and groups that are natural allies for Awesome Foundation chapters. Makerspaces and hackerspaces tend to be communities that are very responsive and excited to collaborate on starting a chapter. Other places that chapters have had success in hunting for good trustees include:
–   Local city or town governments
–   Local journalists and newspapers
–   Chambers of commerce
–   Libraries
–   Community service organizations
–   Colleges and universities
–   Local entrepreneurs, or startup CEOs

*In-person socializing* – Get socializing! Many chapters have reported more success in using face-to-face get-togethers to recruit trustees than in soliciting people over social media. Plus, it's a fun way to meet new people in your local community – and who may become applicants as you get the chapter off the ground.

*Inviting guests* – Guest trustees can be a great way to reach out to parts of your community, and to get people involved who may not otherwise have time. Some chapters have guest trustees at every meeting, and others only have them every once in a while.

*Tailoring the commitment* – A number of chapters have tailored the commitment of being a trustee to make it more accessible for people who might not be able to make the time or financial commitment. This includes "guest" trustees, as well as "shared" trustee seats, for which two members will alternate months or otherwise share the financial commitment.

*Assembling a list and doing an event* – Sometimes it's helpful to get organized. The Seattle chapter was started by creating a list of 40+ organizations and individuals that the founder wanted to get involved. He then published a blog post on his website encouraging people to get in touch if they wanted more information. This eventually led to an invitation to a community information session for people who wanted to get involved.

## How are chapters managed?

If you've selected a well-connected group of trustees, many will often be extremely busy. To address these challenges, many chapters establish roles to help alleviate the logistical load of the chapter. The powers and responsibilities of these roles varies by chapter. One of the most common roles is the Dean.

The Dean can serve a number of functions: point of contact for the public, meeting coordinator, event planner, and even application filter. The function of the Dean varies by chapter, but many chapters allow the

Dean to contribute their time, instead of their money.

There are no global rules about how long the Dean should serve. Some chapters elect to have a rotating Deanship so that everyone experiences it at least once, some Deans serve limitless terms at the pleasure of the group, and some Deans have terms of set length.

Some chapters have also incorporated other roles like:
–   Deputy Dean: coordinates logistics like

meeting places and trustee attendance
– Treasurer: collects and disburses funds
– Event planner: makes events, other than the meetings, happen
– Marketing and social media ninja: issues tweets, press releases, e-mail blasts, etc.
– Intern: helps out on any of the above, frequently for school credit

Below are some examples of models, and other roles, that chapters around the world are using:

*Dean model* – One trustee acts as the Dean, coordinates meetings, and in some instances selects a shortlist of 4-5 applicants for debate at the monthly meeting. There are ten additional trustees who contribute money. The Dean does not contribute financially.

*Dean and Deputy Dean model* – Two trustees (one paying, one non-paying) manage administration. There are then eight additional trustees for grant giving, and one guest trustee from the community at each meeting. Washington, D.C., operates with this model.

*Task Force Awesome model* – Three trustees (one paying, two non-paying) make up a steering committee ("Task Force Awesome"), with nine core trustees and a rotating guest trustee spot. Kingston operates with this model.

*Team Dean model* – Four (all non-paying) individuals act as the team of Deans. No single person takes on all of the responsibility. Responsibilities (like social media, meeting scheduling, and other coordination) are divided. Halifax operates with this model.

*Dean and intern model* – One Dean (paying) and an intern (or group of interns). The Dean manages the administrative and financial aspects, and interns help with promotion. Interns can be arranged through a local university and can receive credit. An alternative is to coordinate with a marketing class at a university that needs a project. Atlanta and London (Ontario) operate with this model, and Edmonton has worked with a marketing class from a local university.

*Scheduled Commitment Model* – Trustees (more than ten) review a calendar of available meetings for a year in advance and commit to at least three meetings.

# How does my new chapter get set up technically?

You've gotten your group together and you're ready to go? Congratulations! Let us know the good news by emailing us at join@awesomefoundation.org. A volunteer will get your chapter set up on the website.

*Website and grant system* – The Awesome Foundation website (awesomefoundation.org) has a private back-end for chapters to use, consisting of an application management system and tools for inviting trustees and customizing the chapter page. The application management system allows trustees to easily view and vote on applications received through the website. Deans can also easily publish a winning project to the chapter's page (and our front page!). The chapter page displays all funded projects, the pictures and names of the trustees, basic contact information for the chapter, and a link to apply for a grant.

The website can be fully localized for use in other languages. Details are available on the Awesome Foundation wiki, at

wiki.awesomestudies.org. You can also contribute to the development of the web platform at github.com/awesomefoundation/awesomebits, and join in discussions about improving the website at groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/awesome-web.

*Awesome Foundation e-mail address* – You can get an official @awesomefoundation.org e-mail forwarding address for your chapter if you're interested. Just register an e-mail account for your chapter (no personal e-mail addresses, please), and get in touch at join@awesomefoundation.org to let us know what it is.

*Global e-mail discussion list* – All chapters are connected by a community discussion list. Many chapters have at least their Dean subscribed to the list so the chapter can stay in touch with the wider community. However, any trustee in the world is welcome to subscribe and contribute. You can join at groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/awesome-foundation.

*Trustees and Deans Facebook group* – While we have a public-facing Facebook page to let the world know about what Awesome Foundation chapters are up to, we also have a private group for trustees and Deans to share the things they've been funding and to communicate with one another. You can request access to it at facebook.com/groups/awesomefound.

*Wiki* – For a shared repository of operational information and resources for Awesome Foundation chapters, check out the wiki, at wiki.awesomestudies.org.

*Logos and visual assets* – Many chapters print stickers or posters to help them promote themselves. We've uploaded a bunch of these resources to the wiki. You're free to use these, and change them up however you like. We also encourage you to share any useful materials you create.

(One thing you may now be wondering is who maintains all this infrastructure, if there isn't actually anyone in charge. The answer is a loose network of volunteers from chapters around the world. This community has also spun up a registered non-profit called the Institute on Higher Awesome Studies (IHAS), to serve as a vehicle for projects that would be difficult for chapters to handle on their own. For example, it acts as the legal entity organizing "summits" bringing together trustees from around the world to talk about Awesome Foundation practices and growth. There is no formal relationship, however, between IHAS and chapters, and chapters are not accountable to IHAS in any way.)

## How do I get people to apply?

Once you have your trustees and are all set up, you need to raise awareness so that awesome people can find out about this great new resource in your community. This is an ongoing challenge, but launching with a boom can help you get off to a great start.

*Word of mouth* – If you've selected your trustees strategically, your chapter will already be well connected to communities that will be interested in the grant opportunity. Get your trustees to help spread the word! The most successful chapters are ones where the members help to build bridges with groups that can consistently provide fresh ideas to the

group. Look for hackerspaces, art galleries, educational institutions, and community organizations as promising places to spread the word.

*News and blogs* – Local television, newspapers, and blogs often are very excited by the launch of an Awesome Foundation chapter. Reach out to them and let them know that you are open for applications. Try to see if a local newspaper column or radio show might be interested in highlighting each month's winners as a regular segment.

*City proclamation* – A few chapters (e.g., Pittsburgh, Austin, and Portland) have been able to get their cities to declare an official "Awesome Day" in honor of the chapter launching. This has been a good way to spread the word, and also bring local government into directing projects towards the chapter.

*Awesome global* – With chapters all around the world, the global Awesome Foundation community can be a big help in spreading the world about your new chapter. The easiest way to do this is to join the global e-mail discussion list and send out an announcement asking people to help promote when you've launched. You'll find that your fellow chapters are more than happy to lend a hand.

## What if the applications are not awesome?

Many chapters will eventually encounter a period in which grant applications are not as interesting as they would hope. Overcoming this can be a challenge, but there are many strategies to help you get more awesome applications:

*Host an event* – Some chapters will hold events in addition to their grant-giving meetings. These can include anything from a happy hour to whatever awesome thing you can dream up!

*Themed grant cycle* – Some chapters have promoted specific themed grant cycles during which they will only consider applications that relate to a certain theme. Examples include months focused on giving grants to teenagers, or months focused on bicycling.

*Support non-winners* – Finding ways to help out and support applicants who were passed over for another awesome project can help foster future awesome projects.

*Partner with other community events* – Just as socializing can be a great way to recruit trustees, it can also be a great way to find new applicants! Find events that would attract people who are making the kind of awesome you are interested in funding, and bring some flyers, stickers, or business cards to spread the awesome!

As a general rule, the awesome you fund is the awesome you get. We've found time and time again that the grant an Awesome Foundation chapter gives in one month will shape the type and number of applications it receives in the next. Awarding a grant to an art project gives rise to more proposals for art projects. A chapter that funds a project that is widely shared and discussed in the previous month will result in more applications for the following month.

# What if the grantee doesn't follow through?

One of the unique things about Awesome Foundation grants is that they are given "no strings attached" – but that also means that occasionally things won't turn out the way you hoped them to. This is ok – chapters don't expect a 100% success rate. Still, too many unsuccessful projects can lead to low morale. Chapters generally look for certain characteristics that increase the chances of success:

1. The likelihood of the project being completed within a short time span
2. The perceived ability of the applicant to carry out the project
3. The ability of the grant to make a difference in being able to complete the project

As a matter of principle, chapters avoid asking grantees to undertake any reporting or to provide receipts or other proof of how the grant was spent – trusting and being trusted usually works out pretty awesomely!

# How do meetings work?

Figuring out how you want to run your meetings is an important first step in getting your chapter off the ground. It helps if you identify a (flexible) structure for discussing and selecting grants. Debate often changes hearts and minds!

Try designating a facilitator for the meeting. If a trustee has seemed frustrated with the speed, tone, or method of deliberations and they have an idea that would fix that, try handing over leading the deliberation to them. Asking someone at the beginning of the meeting if they'd like to "preside" over the whole meeting is a great way to keep members engaged and give anyone who wants to take a shot at running the show.

Here are a few models of meeting deliberation:

*Meet and deliberate* – Trustees meet and review all applications submitted and come to a consensus after a debate. The winner is informed afterwards.

*Pre-select finalists* – Before the meeting, the Dean asks trustees to pick their top applications for the month. At the meeting, trustees review all finalists and come to a consensus after a debate. The winner is informed afterwards.

*Social hour* – Voting happens online. A monthly "social hour" meeting is held at the same location every month, with all applicants invited to attend. The winner is announced. Some chapters also keep things exciting by hosting other kinds of get-togethers:

*Periodic events* – Some chapters host parties where they can celebrate all sorts of awesome things. Sometimes these events highlight past grantees, other times they are just an opportunity to celebrate all the awesome your community has to offer!

*Awesome hours* – A few chapters hold informal "awesome hours" attended by potential applicants, friends of the Awesome Foundation community, and past winners. These are very informal and easy to organize – just find a place (bars or makerspaces work well), make sure a few trustees can attend, and send out

the invitations. Though very low-key, these are great opportunities for potential applicants to learn more about the Awesome Foundation and get feedback on possible applications.

## How frequently do chapters give grants?

Generally, chapters give out grants once a month – though some chapters in very small communities give grants less frequently. The most important thing is maintaining a steady rhythm so that applicants know roughly when to expect a response and that the chapter is still active.

Some chapters elect to give no grant if there are no applications of sufficient interest, but this can lead to a downward spiral. Ottawa, for example, has felt strongly that because the chapter says it gives away $1,000 every month, it will do this no matter what – and that if no project can be chosen, the chapter will give itself the money to host a big party. Over more than four years, this never happened.

## What about chapters in places that don't use dollars?

While the majority of Awesome Foundation chapters are in the United States and Canada, awesome really is everywhere. At the time of writing, chapters were active in more than 15 other countries, including Brazil, France, Israel, Kenya, and Russia. These chapters give grants in local currencies, rather than in dollars.

Determining the right amount for the grant is an important question to think through. The amount should be large enough to allow for the execution of a project in the local context, but small enough that ordinary people can contribute as trustees. Remember that if you're the first chapter starting up in a country, you're also setting the standard for all future chapters there!

By way of a few examples, the London chapter gives £1000 (about $1500), the Paris chapter gives €1000 (about $1100), the Copenhagen chapter gives kr 5000 (about $725), the Nairobi chapter gives KSh 100,000 (about $1100), the Tel Aviv chapter gives ₪3,000 (about $750), and the Moscow chapter gives ₽30,000 (about $500).

## How do chapters collect and distribute the money?

The general ethos of the Awesome Foundation is to create organizational processes that are extremely lightweight and easy to implement. As a result, most chapters do not keep a common bank account for the grant money. Chapters must consider both how to collect funds from trustees, and how they want to disburse funds to winners.

Below are a few examples of models used by chapters around the world:

*Venmo or other online transaction system* – Many chapters have found that e-commerce tools like Venmo or WePay can make the collection of funds on a monthly basis a very simple process. These tools can also aid in the

delivery of funds to winners.

*Cash at meetings* – Some chapters ask trustees to show up to monthly meetings with $100 cash in hand. Once a winner is selected, the dean or one of the trustees is charged with the task of delivering the $1,000 to the winner. Some chapters will actually put the $1,000 in a paper bag for delivery.

*Up front* – Trustees provide a full year's worth of contributions at the beginning of the year, thus committing them to the whole year. The delivery of the grant to the winner is then decided at each meeting.

*Bank account* – Some chapters (e.g., Liverpool) collect their funds in a shared bank account, for which the Dean and an additional "treasurer" trustee are signatories. Trustees set up standing orders to automatically pay into the account monthly, and winners are given a cheque from the account, signed by the treasurer.

Given the loose structure, trustees' contributions are considered a gift, and not subject to any charitable tax deduction. While some few chapters may organize themselves to run their finances through another organization with registered charitable status, we find this is too cumbersome to be advisable.

## How do I maintain a chapter?

The life of chapters depends on trustee engagement. Some chapters have a set of informal standards that they agree to, like:
–   Trustees should read the grant proposals in advance and be able to discuss them at meetings
–   If a trustee doesn't show up to a scheduled meeting, he or she is out
–   Attendance is required at two out of every three meetings
–   Advanced notification is expected for missed meetings

–   Financial contribution is expected before or at scheduled meetings, or the trustee is understood to have withdrawn
–   If a trustee wishes to resign, they must find their own replacement

Some chapters codify such standards in a trustee handbook, while others simply discuss them at meetings. Guidance on what you might include in a trustee handbook can be found on the Awesome Foundation wiki, at wiki. awesomestudies.org.

## How can a chapter grow once established?

Awesome can be contagious, and can lead to a lot of interest. One of the persistent questions with chapters around the world is how to deal with an influx of individuals interested in serving as trustees.

More trustees allow for more frequent grants and connections to more communities, but a small trustee group makes settling on a grant by

consensus and building rapport easier. Below are some examples of how chapters have dealt with this challenge:

*Waiting list* – Some chapters keep the trustee group strictly limited to ten trustees, opting to maintain a waiting list of interested trustees that are welcomed as spots open up.

*Multiple chapters, alternating months* – Some chapters have created two linked groups. The two chapters operate under the same common name, and alternate months on contributing money and choosing grantees.

*Multiple chapters, multiple grants* – In some cities, there is enough interest to split into two coordinated chapters, each making a grant every month.

*The more the merrier* – Some chapters have just brought on more people! Since trustees miss meetings, increasing the number means that you'll have close to ten trustees at every meeting. Surplus funds are saved until there is enough to make an extra award.

## Closing words

$1,000 is enough money to produce a focused project, but we've found over time that the main value of the Awesome Foundation actually lies in the other types of assistance we can offer – validation, connections, and advice.

Through your chapter's trustees, winning (and sometimes even non-winning) applicants are able to access multiple communities and be promoted to an audience they would not otherwise have reached. In some cases, an Awesome Foundation grant allows the winner to build the initial prototype of a project and receive the needed attention to meet collaborators and acquire larger amounts of funding from others.

The trustees also play a big role in encouraging winners to actually complete their project. Many chapters have trustees volunteer to be mentors to winning projects, helping to keep the trustees in touch with the progress of the project and find ways of connecting them with other projects that the chapter has previously funded.

Creating an Awesome Foundation chapter can be a lot of work, but it is also awesomely rewarding. This is why so many chapters have arisen around the world. We look forward to seeing you advance the interest of awesome in the universe!