

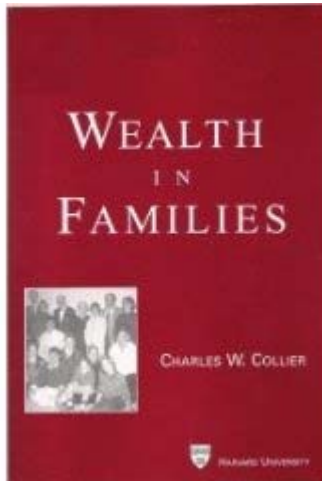
Six questions that will increase your wealth— No money required!

by Sam Pettway

In October 2009, during my reunion at graduate business school, I was privileged to attend a session led by Charles Collier, Senior Philanthropic Advisor at Harvard University (surely one of the more captivating titles we've encountered lately). Charlie is the unassuming but influential author of [Wealth in Families](#), a book highly acclaimed for its practical insights on philanthropy for families of means. For a consultant to nonprofits and the philanthropists who support them, this was a most stimulating environment!

Charlie's presentation was entitled "The Practices of Flourishing Families," and he had much to say about values we know to be treasured by most nonprofits, such as transparency, fairness and principle-based decision-making.

Talk of money and wealth was just part of his presentation. The more Charlie spoke of the link between a family's stories, its legacy and its effectiveness, the more I realized his concepts had direct relevance to the nonprofits, foundations and philanthropists we are privileged to serve.



Given the average age of the session's attendees (early 60s), Mr. Collier asked how many had parents who were still living; about half raised their hands. He then invited those in a position to do so to commit to engaging in thoughtful, purposeful conversations with their important elders.

The goal, of course, would be to capture otherwise overlooked parts of the family legacy that inevitably will inform generations to come, whether voiced or not. Charlie himself, a thoughtful man to the core, was enormously surprised how much he learned when he held just such a discussion with his own aging father.

building strong foundations for nonprofits®

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The same logic has potentially substantial relevance for nonprofits and foundations. Tapping the wisdom of those who have come before us requires no money whatsoever. Nevertheless, how often do we take full advantage of the special perspective of long-serving executive directors, staff, volunteers or donors who may be leaving the nonprofits that mean so much to us all?

With thanks to Charles Collier, therefore, I offer a slightly paraphrased summary of the questions he suggested we pose to our family elders, with the thought that the questions could spark an important conversation with the most entrenched devotees of the organizations you hold dear:

- 1. Tell us about a high point in your service here.**
- 2. Tell us about a low point.**
- 3. Tell us about a turning point.**
- 4. Tell us about the individuals who were most important to you here.**
- 5. Tell us about one regret you're leaving with.**
- 6. Tell us about the unifying theme of your work with us.**

The answers you elicit to these questions will be incredibly illuminating—especially for those who are either unaccustomed to intimate conversations or uncomfortable with discussions of departure or mortality.

Whether your conversation is with a long-serving executive, an esteemed volunteer or a devoted staffer, the discussions you prompt by questions such as these are bound to leave all parties wealthier.

Got questions of your own to suggest? [Email](#) them to us at BoardWalk and we'll publish a sample in a future issue of smorgasBoard.®

Sam Pettway is the founding director of [BoardWalk Consulting](#), a firm committed to “building strong foundations for nonprofits”® through executive search, board governance and other advisory services. He may be reached by [email](#) or via one of the contact points on the first page of this article.