

The Michael J. Fox Foundation Case

Executive Summary

The Michael J. Fox Foundation faces a significant organizational risk in deciding whether to invest in a multi-million-dollar infrastructure project designed to revolutionize how Parkinson's disease data is collected or to maintain its existing research methodology. The decision carries far-reaching implications for the Foundation's financial stability, donor confidence, and ability to advance its mission. On one hand, the new approach could accelerate discoveries and position the Foundation at the forefront of innovation; on the other, it could temporarily divert funds away from active research, slowing progress and testing stakeholder trust.

Background

Parkinson's disease affects 10 million people worldwide. The disease is complex, and symptoms vary greatly from person to person. It's often said that if you've met one person with Parkinson's disease, you've met one person with Parkinson's disease. This saying underscores the diversity of how Parkinson's disease manifests. Given the complexity and individuality of Parkinson's disease, advancing our understanding demands a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to research.

During the height of his acting career, Michael J. Fox was diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's disease in 1991 at the age of 29. Nine years later, in the fall of 2000, he launched The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, (MJFF) which *The New York Times* has called "the most credible voice on Parkinson's research in the world."

] MJFF is dedicated to accelerating the development of a cure for the disease through innovative research and strategic funding. Guided by its mission to take bold, science-driven risks, it has become one of the leading global funders of Parkinson's research. The organization does not maintain an endowment; instead, every dollar raised goes toward funding immediate research.

In 2009, the Foundation developed an alternative approach to collecting large-scale biological data, such as spinal taps and blood samples, from hospitals nationwide. Implementing this new research method would require a \$5 million upfront investment out of a \$30 million annual budget along with sustained costs thereafter. The Foundation's leadership and board has to decide whether this shift in methodology is worth the cost, balancing the promise of long-term breakthroughs against financial strain and potential donor concern.

Case

Changing the research methodology would divert funding from active research for at least a year, possibly longer. While the potential impact is significant, there's a risk that the return on investment may not meet expectations. Should the Michael J. Fox Foundation risk diverting research funds to implement an infrastructure change that could transform how Parkinson's research is conducted?