

# AtoZ Challenge: Fundraising

26 Pointers for Becoming a Strong Nonprofit Fundraiser



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## **A** is for Appreciate Donors

Our young adult son has been home with us a few months now. I've noticed he's very appreciative of every gesture we extend. I'm talking about things we've always done – picking up a preferred food, handing him something, turning up the tv. None of these actions are extraordinary or deserving of much praise, and yet he's very appreciative. When I mentioned it, he said he's making a concerted effort to express his appreciation for even the littlest of gestures to remind himself that he should take nothing for granted.

I couldn't help but agree - and then think of how his perspective applies to the world of nonprofit fundraising!

January is a wonderful time of year to show donor appreciation. You've likely spent a good deal of time and energy asking for support over the past few months. Hopefully, your donors have already received the transactional donation receipt immediately, or within a day or two of making their gift. But have you also sent what I call a relational thank you – for their generosity, for making an impact, for wanting to make a difference – letting them know the impact and difference they're making?

Don't be afraid to thank them more than once in the coming months. As I like to say – when they least expect it!

Have you tried a thank you video, call, text, or note? Have you posted a shout-out on social media? Did you (or a board member) personally contact them – especially any new donors, someone who increased their gift, or anyone who became a monthly donor?

Even if a donor has received a tax receipt for their gift earlier in the year, particularly if they've given more than once in the year – a summary of all the year's donations would be a nice touch.

And, while we're thinking about appreciation – have you let your board members, volunteers, staff, and program participants know how much you appreciate them?

## **B** is for Building Relationships

You've heard it before, and you'll hear it again: Fundraising is all about building relationships. I'm not saying anything new. So why bother to say it at all? Because all important concepts bear repeating. and because building takes time, energy, and resources.

Anyone who's ever built anything - from an IKEA bookshelf to a house, knows that having the right tools makes all the difference in the world. As one who loves manual labor and the process of building - and has, by chance or by choice, lived in homes of varying degrees of fixer-upper-ness, I've learned this the hard way.

Sometimes a small, inexpensive tool like a nail cutter or just the right-size drill bit can save you hours of unnecessary frustration. Not to mention the beauty of a pole digger compared to a shovel when building a fence!

Anyone who's thought, "Let me run this mail merge right quick," – only to be pulling your hair out hours later, knows what I'm talking about!

What tools are needed to build relationships in fundraising?

To decide the tools you need, you must know the job to be done. While fundraising is the topic at hand, not every relationship in fundraising is the same – and therefore, you may require a variety of tools.

Remember, all relationships depend on communication. So, the most fundamental tools you need are those that allow you to communicate effectively. And communication is never a one-way street.

Think about the different groups you'll want to build relationships with like foundations, big-gift donors, small gift donors, monthly donors, volunteers, board members, staff. You'll be communicating with the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers and each generation that follows, with individuals from varying gender identities, religions, and ethnic and racial backgrounds. The list goes on

How can you best get each of these jobs done? You may need different means of communication (written, spoken; events, private meetings); different language styles; different times of the year, days of the week, or times of the day.

In addition to the ways YOU speak to and share your ideas, thoughts, and feelings with your audience – you’ll also need to find tools to listen to them. You can’t communicate if you do all of the talking!

We cannot treat everyone in our community the same and expect to build authentic, meaningful relationships. Think about the various individuals and groups that you want to build relationships with, in support of your cause, and ask yourself: what is the BEST way to communicate with them?

And once you decide which tools you need – whether the “tool” is a person to be hired, software to be purchased, or training to better understand technique – do your best to acquire those tools as quickly as possible.

## C is for Communicate

*“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”*

George Bernard Shaw

Last week in our AtoZ Challenge, we discussed Building Relationships. As I noted in *Promised Land*, *“To build a relationship, you must communicate. As any relationship expert worth their salt would tell you, communication isn’t just about talking. You’ve also got to listen actively. You want to create a dialogue, not a monologue.”* (p 102)

Communicating with your supporters is about carrying on a conversation around the cause you care about – whatever that is and however or wherever it takes place. In today’s world, while we have to be careful even being in the same room with another, communication has changed drastically. But even before COVID, with the proliferation of technology that allows us to communicate instantly, with potentially millions, across time and space – communicating is super easy AND super complicated at the same time.

*“Sometimes communication has nothing to do with words but relies on observation and action. Through our actions, we convey respect, dignity, hope, loyalty, gratitude, and so many more emotions—emotions that are the foundation for a lasting relationship.”* (Promised Land, p 102)

Who hasn’t heard the expression, “It’s not what you said, it’s how you said it”? Or “your look says it all.” And we know a picture’s worth a thousand words.

So, today – on this celebration of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., one of many great leaders of the Civil Rights movement, let’s ponder how our policies, procedures, and practices offer insight into our true attitudes. Let’s decide today that we will make decisions to better communicate our commitment to justice and equity and our gratitude for all those supporters who care about what we care about.

## D is for Describe

Have you ever wondered why a picture is worth a thousand words?

Could it be because when we see something, we don't need to rely on the power of words? In writing to our donors, however, we must rely on the power of words. But through those words, we must help them truly understand the situation. We must describe, for them, the problem they are helping to solve or the experience being offered.

Show, don't tell. Every creative writing teacher has said it. When writing, we need to show – we need to help the reader see what is happening.

Compare these:

- *She was angry.*
- *She raised her fists and stomped her feet. Her cheeks flushed a deep red as she shouted, "Stop talking!"*

One tells us someone's feeling, the other draws us into the scene as if we're watching it with our own eyes.

When writing donor communications, we need to SHOW. To show, we need to DESCRIBE. Describe what it is like to face a cancer diagnosis, to struggle to read, or to enjoy a profound piece of art.

Compare these:

- *Art moves people.*
- *The charcoal shading drew me immediately into the crowd of women around me. The gentle placement of a hand on a shoulder, heads nodding as our eyes met, spoke volumes. Old and young. Black, brown, and white. Tall and short. Heavy and thin. We each knew. We didn't know one another, but together we shared a moment immersed in the companionship of motherhood.*

When we DESCRIBE, we invite the reader into the moment to feel WITH those being described.

## **E is for Explore**

Two of the most cringe-worthy sentences I hear in working with nonprofits are, “We’ve always done it this way” and “We’ve never done it that way.” Two sides of the same coin. Both scream “We’re stuck in a rut!” I’m not saying change for change’s sake – I’m saying, don’t be afraid to explore new possibilities.

One of the few positive outcomes of the pandemic year, from a fundraising perspective, has been that many nonprofits are exploring new ways to fulfill their mission, communicate with donors, and fundraise for their causes.

When my clients suddenly couldn’t do what they always do, wonderful things happened.

An onsite Christian puppet theater has been hosting a nightly Facebook live event since last March reaching senior citizens and small children struggling with isolation. A rural arts center has rallied the community to share art in their homes, create a community Spotify list of Christmas songs and a Christmas lights town map, and are working on a favorite RomCom share for Valentine’s Day. Many others launched monthly giving programs to respond to the crisis and keep their doors open.

They’ve all now done new things that they’d never tried before – and made new connections, found new supporters, and gave to their communities in ways they’d never dreamed of.

What have you done to explore the possibilities for serving your community in new and different ways during this pandemic?

## **F** is for Foster a Growth Mindset

Too often I hear new clients hesitantly express concern that they are competing with too many other causes and/or that their mission is not as “sexy” as others’. I hear others wonder if they are causing “donor fatigue” by communicating with donors too much.

I can’t help but think these ideas are self-limiting and stem from a scarcity mindset. Somehow, we’ve been led to believe that there is not enough generosity to go around. But if you spend your time sharing your vision and mission with the world in a way that engages others who care about what you care about – they’ll want to hear from you and, if they have the capacity, will want to donate.

Instead of focusing on the “lack,” I encourage you to nurture a growth mindset.

“Nurturing a growth mindset isn’t a pie-in-the-sky dream that riches will simply manifest to solve all your problems, that every press release you send will garner media attention, or that your email open rate will hit 100%. A growth mindset means understanding and believing that your present reality, whether it be the problem you’re trying to solve or the resources you currently have available to solve it, can shift. A growth mindset instills a sense of courage and persistence rooted in the belief that you can accomplish your mission and reach your goals.... The fact is, you have to function within your current reality, but you can’t let go of the bigger, brighter vision.... Adopting a growth mindset will act as a driving force to get you there. For this, you’ll need to be honest about your current reality AND create a clear enough picture of your vision that people will want to join you along the way” (*Promised Land*, 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment).

A growth mindset leads you to believe that your mission will be accomplished and that one day you will be able to stand up to announce that you are closing your doors because you’ve realized your dream and solved the problem you sought to address.

Don’t be afraid to dream!



## **G** is for Gather Stories

Once upon a time...just the other day...you won't believe what happened...what happened was...

We're all familiar with the first line of a good story. Our bodies lean in, we focus our attention, and we follow along eager to hear what's next and how the story will end.

A story has the power to captivate an audience. But more importantly, a story has the power to ignite an emotion.

The question is, in our role as fundraisers, what emotion are we trying to ignite?

Some might say "sympathy." We want people to feel sorry for someone in need. But sympathy often makes us feel separate and apart from the one in need. We would do better to spark empathy. When we empathize, we relate to the need, the pain, the problem as if it were our own – and therefore, we're more likely to give in response.

But are these our only two choices? Sympathy or empathy? These aren't even emotions. A good story, like a good novel or movie, takes me through a range of emotions. Sadness. Joy. Anger. Hope. Fear. Courage.

What emotions does your story evoke? What does it make me feel and how does it motivate me to act?

I'm personally more motivated by anger and hope than by sadness. If I hear a story of injustice, I get angry and want to fight the injustice.

If you're raising money for the arts – have you inspired me, made me feel anything? Have you reminded me how the art makes me feel? Joy? Transcendent? Uplifted?

If you're raising money for a historical society or land preservation project – what do you want me to feel? Pride? Nostalgia? Desire to leave a legacy?

Sending me pictures of sad, pain-filled stories of trauma doesn't do it. If I'm not able to find hope in the situation or understand how my donation is going to lead to a resolution, you've lost me.

When you gather stories, keep asking yourself – what emotions does this evoke and what call to action does it inspire?

And don't forget that your stories can be from and about all kinds of folx. Ask your board members, volunteers, staff, former program participants (especially those removed from a problem your organization helped them with in the past), community members and donors why the organization is important to them. Ask them for anecdotes from their experience that speaks to the core values, philosophy, mission or vision of your organization.

By creating a series of stories that offer insight into why your mission exists and what you hope to accomplish, you are helping your audience of potential donors be drawn into a narrative larger and more powerful than themselves—captivating your audience and drawing them in, eager to know how the story will ultimately end.

## H is for Hear

Many do-gooders – board members, volunteers, and even fundraisers - operate under the myth that fundraising is ALL about asking for money. This emphasis on asking for money leads to reluctance and hesitation.

But, a good deal of building relationships with donors to your organization or supporters of your cause is about listening to what others are saying - and even hearing what is left unsaid.

Many years ago when I was studying the Chinese language as a student and teacher in Taiwan and Hong Kong, I was struck by the character strokes of the word for listen - and, consequently - for the word hear. As I understood it, the character for "listen" contains the characters for eye, ear, and heart within it. And the word for "hear" is the word for listen followed by a character that means "to arrive at." In other words, to hear you must arrive at listening. And listening involves your eyes, your ears, and your heart.

The art of fundraising resides in the ability to ask a question or engage in a conversation in a way that allows you to hear the concerns and desires of the potential donor. Avoid talking too much about yourself, the organization, or your wonderful programs and outcomes. Instead, hear their concerns and cares, their fear and hope, their passion, and their desire to make a difference in the world.

When you engage with donors, do you hear the desires of their heart? Have you invited them to share WHY they care about the cause? Do you understand what difference they want to make in the world?

## I is for Inspire

Our job as fundraisers is to raise funds. Of course.

The question is – how do we do that?

We must inspire! We must fill them with the urge to do or feel something. We must present them with an opportunity to give to a cause they feel something about.

Through our writing, we cultivate feelings – sadness and joy, despair and hope, fear and courage.

Our stories paint a picture of sadness so their gift can spark joy; they can transform despair into hope; they help fear turn into courage.

In fundraising, we are not trying to convince others to believe as we do – we are inspiring those who already care to do something about the cause they care about.

*Have you inspired anyone today?*

## J is for Joke

When was the last time you told or laughed at a good joke? Or a bad joke?

I had the pleasure of watching Coming 2 America 2 and a few Dave Chappelle sketches with my family this weekend. Some great jokes!

What does that have to do with fundraising you might ask? Sometimes when we are working to save the world, we can forget that a good joke can be a great remedy when life feels overwhelming.

As I shared in *Promised Land*, 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment:

*Urgency and anger can be powerful motivators for action, but if everything in life is super serious, do-gooder, leading a nonprofit could destroy you. Be careful not to tank your mission before you get anywhere near the Promised Land.*

*Having a sense of humor means you don't take yourself or life so seriously that you can't find joy, irony, and ludicrousness amidst the struggles. Can you laugh? Can you laugh at yourself? You don't need to be a standup comic or continuously joke around, but can you search for differing perspectives in troubling situations over which you have no control?*

## **K** is for Keep Going

Keep Going.

When we are working to change the world, we can get caught up in getting everything done – at once. We work long, tough hours – we have to keep going...

But remember that to keep going you don't have to constantly move at high speed. Some days you can move slowly. Some days, just sitting still and doing nothing is the best way to keep going.

Fundraising is a marathon, not a sprint.

Remember to pace yourself. Take care of yourself. Keep calm. Build relationships. Be grateful. Keep doing good.

## **L** is for Listen to Your Community

*Have you ever had lunch with a friend who never stopped talking about themselves?*

*A few months ago, I realized “Narcissa,” whom I’d considered a friend, did just that. Each time we got together, she shared story after story about her life and why she knew more than those around her. When I first noticed, I thought maybe it was a fluke. The last time we got together, I took closer note. During our two hours together, I barely spoke, and never once did she initiate interest in what was happening in my life.*

*Of course, we all lend a listening ear when a friend is in need or simply needs a sounding board from time to time. But, if every time you get together, the conversation (and the universe) seems to revolve around them, you might begin to wonder. You can’t get a word in edgewise, and you aren’t sure your presence is even noticed or appreciated.*

*Many organizations try to entice donors by talking about all their excellent programs. They throw out statistics, making sure those who visit their website, read their emails, or see their social media posts know how credible and reliable they are and how deserving they are of money. Demonstrating your solutions are effective and reporting positive impact is important, but it does little to honor your community.*

*When you brag too much about your organization, you risk sounding like Narcissa. (Promised Land, The 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment)*

Even if your communications aren’t filled with bragging about yourself – and you write beautifully written donor-centric communications, making it all about the donor OR you write community-centric communications filled with stories of empowered community members – you are still doing all the talking.

So – how do you LISTEN to your community?

I once worked briefly with an organization that conducted exit interviews with every family that had participated in their shelter and financial subsistence

programs to avoid homelessness when they were on the brink. More than 85% said they'd prefer to "live" in one shelter during the 12-week program instead of moving each week as was customary. Despite this overwhelming preference, the leadership refused to explore this option as a possibility because they believed volunteers preferred this model.

Apart from this "volunteer-centric" approach being lopsided, they'd never actually surveyed volunteers to find out if this was true either.

When was the last time you – as a fundraiser – listened to the community being served? This doesn't mean you have to ask intrusive questions or interview folks while they are in the midst of crisis. But have you considered how to better understand their needs and wishes? Have you invited representation of community members to join your board or leadership team in any way? Do you spend time being with and learning from those being served? They might be the hungry, the homeless, the jobless or the ill. They might be audience members, alumni, or current members of your dance, performing arts, or musical productions.

Regardless of who benefits from your programs or services, you'll be a much better fundraiser and changemaker if you learn to listen to the community.

When was the last time you picked up the phone to speak with a board member, volunteer or donor about WHY they are involved with the work you do? Have you asked what inspires them? What motivates them? Why the work matters? Have you conducted surveys?

On social media, do you follow accounts that would provide insight into the community who cares about what you care about? Are you learning from what you see or read that could apply to your situation? Have you rejected the "we're different" mindset that precludes an open-mind to new ideas or solutions to the problem you're trying to solve?

Remember – you aren't engaging in monologue. You're building relationships with people who care about what you care about – to make the world a better place.

When we listen, we admit that we may not know everything and that we can learn and grow. When was the last time you listened to your community?



## **M** is for Manage Your Mission

Folx in the nonprofit sector often reject the notion that they “should operate more like a business.” The problem with the assertion to be “more like” a business is that it fundamentally ignores the reality that a nonprofit IS a business. You can’t be “more like” something you already are! A nonprofit is a business that operates differently than a for-profit business is all. And, for that matter, not all for profit businesses operate alike!

*To successfully achieve your vision and fulfill your mission, to avoid mission creep, and to exist with purpose, you need to manage your mission.*

*Remember, a nonprofit is a business. As you make vision and mission-centric decisions to keep the organization on the right path, don’t ignore legal, moral, ethical, and managerial best practices.*

*Whether you’re a founder, new executive director, or a volunteer board member, if you don’t have a basic understanding of business, surround yourself with those who do. Look for a mentor or coach who’s done this before; take a business course or two; ensure the organization has an effective board and a trusted advisory committee to turn to if needed.... don’t neglect the business aspects critical to longevity.*

*Are you in compliance with federal and state regulations regarding board governance, insurance, fundraising, and financial accounting? How often do you review your bylaws to make sure your bylaws and your practice align? Do you have policies and procedures to ensure you aren’t person-dependent and your systems will outlast any individual? Have you made an effort to know what you don’t know? (Promised Land, The 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment)*

The important point here is that – to be successful – you must understand how your business operates and then manage it accordingly. Don’t mistakenly believe that it won’t matter because you are a nonprofit – or that human resources, workers’ compensation, labor laws, sales tax, background checks, accounting, insurance and every other policy or law that applies in your city, county, or state doesn’t apply to you. You don’t want to just run on a wing and a prayer!

## **N** is for Narrate Stories

To narrate is to provide a spoken or written account of an event or series of events.

As do-gooders, as those looking to have a positive impact on the world, and as nonprofit fundraisers – it is our responsibility to provide a spoken or written account of the situation, the problem, the programs or productions – the who, what, when, where, why and how of our mission.

The trick, though, is to ensure that – as narrator – we don't drown out the voices of the active characters involved. Let's not be afraid to let individuals narrate their own stories. Have you invited participants or program alums, volunteers, board members, staff, donors, or audience members to share their own stories related to your mission?

I've often seen animal rights organizations use personification to narrate from an animal's perspective. Have you ever considered using such literary devices for inanimate objects – pieces of art in a museum, the window or wall of a historic monument, or the notes of a musical score – to tell a story?

Instead of simply telling people what you do as if you're creating a laundry list or to-do list, try to narrate a story that draws the reader or listener into the world your organization inhabits. If I'm not there, I will struggle to understand and to care unless or until you paint a picture and help me feel as if I'm part of the story.

## **O** is for Oppose Injustice

Oppose Injustice.

Simple.

No matter our nonprofit's mission area - human services, education, the arts, recreation, historical preservation — the list goes on. NO MATTER our mission focus - we are called to oppose injustice in every form, everywhere, every time.

## **P** is for Prepare for Profitability

Profitability is a relative term that considers an organization's efficiency in making a profit relative to its resources. Like "return on investment," profitability in a for-profit entity calculates how much money it takes to raise a dollar.

Distinguishing between profit and profitability is vital because a nonprofit's purpose is not making a profit for shareholders but impacting society. If you make a difference with a few resources, you demonstrate you'll have a more significant impact with more resources. This speaks to your profitability.

The question is, can you articulate for a potential donor how their gift will make an impact? Can you demonstrate how an increase in revenue will not simply be throwing good money after bad to maintain the status quo? Can you ensure their money will make a difference? In other words, what is the return on their investment? The return may not be monetary—it may not increase your profit, but what good will come from it? And what will it cost?

Your job is to show the donor how every penny they spend is well worth it.

Being prepared for profitability means you need to be laser-focused on reaching the next level of excellence. This laser focus often has nothing to do with money. Instead, it means you need to get your entire house in order. (*Promised Land, The 3rd Commandment*)

## Q is for Quit Deficit Fundraising

I'm not sure who said it first - and I don't think it was in the context of fundraising, but the phrase "Your lack of planning does not constitute an emergency on my part" certainly seems to apply.

Your budget, fiscal year-end, the December 31st calendar year-end, or your fundraising goal is not a REASON for a donor to make a gift to your organization. Although many nonprofits rely heavily on these somewhat arbitrary dates and dollar amounts in their fundraising appeals, and they may provide important information for a potential donor to understand why you're writing at this moment or asking for a specific amount of money — they should not be considered the motivating factor.

When you emphasize that you need to raise money to make your budget, you're engaging in what I like to call "deficit fundraising." While this type of fundraising might be necessary during a crisis (like the COVID-19 pandemic upheaval) if, year after year, you send a letter or series of emails asking your donor community to help you make your budget - what they may be hearing is that you aren't very good at budgeting.

To clarify, a crisis arises when unexpected, unplanned circumstances outside of your control (pandemic, natural disaster) have a negative impact on your ability to fulfill your mission. A deficit is simply a gap in your planned income and your planned expenses - with your expenses being larger than your income. A potential donor might just think, "Have you considered cutting expenses?"

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you should always plan a balanced budget without any fundraising. For many nonprofits, that is impossible. I'm saying - quit deficit fundraising.

Instead of focusing on your deficit, focus on the impact a donation will have on the cause you (and the donor) care about. Tell the story of what will happen with the money raised. Paint a picture of how the money raised will change the world (whether your little corner or the big wide world). Give the prospective donor a real REASON to invest in the vision of a new, different, better world.

## **R** is for Recognize Volunteers

From April 18-24, the country celebrated Volunteer Appreciation Week. During this week, I saw many social media posts and received quite a few emails expressing gratitude for the volunteers at various nonprofits.

I couldn't help but wonder how nonprofit organizations appreciate their volunteers the rest of the year.

In the nonprofit sector, we talk a great deal about donor appreciation and recognition. Even to the point that this "donor-centric" approach is being challenged by the voices from the community-centric fundraising movement. Two of the 10 principles of community-centric fundraising are:

*4. All who engage in strengthening the community are equally valued, whether volunteer, staff, donor, or board member.*

*5. Time is valued equally as money.*

In reality, the ONLY thing that any of us have that we cannot make more of is our time.

We can make more money. We can acquire new talents and skills. But once a moment – an hour – has passed, we will never get it back.

For this reason, recognizing volunteers who give their time to further the mission of your organization is critically important.

And remember, board members are volunteers.

How do you recognize your volunteers? How do you show your appreciation?

## **S is for Share Success**

Everyone appreciates good news.

So much of what we hear on television, social media, streaming services, and radio is negative. As do gooders, we have an opportunity to share success - feel good stories about the good being done in the world. And our donors, volunteers, and community members deserve to hear the good news. We want to know about the positive change happening in the world, especially when it directly relates to a cause we care about.

If your communications focus too much on the problems that need to be solved, the despair and sense of failure can be overwhelming. Be sure to regularly and enthusiastically share the success of your program participants and your organization. Be careful to avoid data dumps of facts and figures so you don't run the risk of information overload.

People who support your cause need to feel like their efforts are making a difference. Sharing the positive impact of their time, talent and treasure will go a long way towards future success.

## **T** is for Thank Everyone

Thank everyone:

- your program participants
- your staff
- your volunteers
- your Board Members
- your donors
- your strategic partners
- your sponsors
- your vendors

Creating a culture of gratitude makes every day more enjoyable for everyone.



## **U** is for Understand Your Donors

A few years ago, my husband and I made a small donation to a children's hospital where my husband had spent 6 months of his life, at the age of 6, recovering from Rheumatic Fever. Since then, we've made two additional gifts. To this day, we have not received one thank you note, phone call, or acknowledgement of any kind beyond the credit card transaction receipt.

As a fundraiser, I can't help but wonder if they wonder why we've made three gifts. Yes, they by no means qualify as "major gifts" but I can assure you that if anyone had reached out to ask what inspired the first or second or third gift, it could have been the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

This hospital saved my husband's life and because of various family circumstances, he had no visitors. The hospital staff were his only contact with anyone for 6 months. They helped him relearn how to walk and talk. While I am certain none of those staff remain at the hospital 50 years later, his emotional attachment to the institution is solid.

But they have no idea.

Do you know WHY your donors give to your organization? Do you know what inspires them? Do you know what they hope happens because of their gift? What motivates them? Why they care?

If not, do everything you can to find out. It could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

## **V** is for Visit Donors

In my last post, I encouraged you to “understand your donors.” Today, I encourage you to visit your donors. I know it can be time consuming and maybe scary if it is new for you.

When I was an active executive director, donor visits was the favorite part of my job. I could learn so much about why the donor cared about the cause we addressed - but even more, I found inspiration and was motivated to keep at it. Knowing that an entire community of individuals were rooting for our mission and cared about what was happening because of the work we did, day-in and day-out sparked renewed energy in me to keep working towards the vision.

Whenever I felt like I was constantly trying to put out fires and couldn't see the forest for the trees, I knew I needed to get out to speak to the community. I needed to hear from the donor willing to write a \$250K check. And I needed to hear from the donor who gave \$25. Both had stories to tell me and both inspired me.

While your capacity to visit with donors may be limited, depending on your other responsibilities and how many donors you have - but when you're scheduling calls to visit donors, don't forget the “little” donor who may have a powerful story that keeps you going.

Remember, donor engagement is about building relationships with those who care about what you care about - regardless of the size of the checkbook. If you haven't created a practice of visiting donors, please give it a try. You won't be sorry.

## **W** is for Welcome New Donors

To welcome someone is to let them know you appreciate their presence and that they “belong.”

I encourage you to establish a practice for welcoming new donors. What can you do to make them feel appreciated? Beyond the thank you letter and tax receipt. How do you help them become part of the community?

Do you give them a “tour” - either literally or via written or telephone communications? Do you help them feel comfortable in their new community? Do you let them know who to contact if they want more information? Do you ask them why they came? Do you learn more about what the impact they hope to have by joining?

Do you thank them when they least expect it? Not right after their first donation, but maybe again a month or two later? Do you check in to ask about their experience with your organization?

*How do you turn your first-time donors into community members who feel as if they belong?*

## **X** is for Xeriscape

Finding a verb that begins with X and has something even remotely related to finding your voice is no easy task but then I came across the verb xeriscape. If you live in a xeric (arid) area, you'll have to xeriscape your garden by using plants that need little moisture or irrigation. I thought immediately of a time, about eight years ago, when I was facing a particularly tough period, professionally. As the newly hired head of a small private high school that had celebrated being debt free just before my hire, I needed to manage the \$1.2m deficit I identified within the first 6 weeks of my arrival. Working to handle the financial crisis while keeping the morale up, proved to be difficult.

I had been given a small bamboo plant for my office – and for the life of me couldn't keep it alive. At one faculty/staff meeting, I placed the glass bowl filled with the rocks that once held the robust little bamboo plant in the center of the room. I distributed the rocks and encouraged everyone to acknowledge the 'rocks' that weighed them down – the fear, discouragement, and frustration – as they returned the rocks to the bowl. I then filled the bowl with water, symbolically washing the rocks to encourage new growth.

The next morning when I arrived at my office, someone had replaced the bamboo plant and added a small note that read: ...sometimes we need to just water rocks.... When all seems lost, and we are feeling isolated and alone – we must xeriscape our lives. We must find those tricks – hobbies, habits, activities, television shows, books, or people – that offer a touch of beauty and a bit-of-joy, that give us strength and help us persevere through the dry, dark nights.

And sometimes we water rocks...

## Y is for YES!

Shondra Rhimes, well-known writer, producer, and director of popular television shows like Grey's Anatomy and Scandal gave a TED Talk in 2016 that began, "So a while ago, I tried an experiment. For one year, I would say yes to all the things that scared me. Anything that made me nervous, took me out of my comfort zone, I forced myself to say yes to."

Sometimes fundraising can be a little frightening.

So today I invite you to 'Just YES it'. Own YES as a verb, a call to action, a way of being.

As Shondra did, say YES to that which scares you, makes you nervous, takes you out of your comfort zone. Not sure you can accomplish something – YES it.

Remember the only way to fail in fundraising is to never ask for support.

Whenever I think about doing something that takes me out of my comfort zone, I think of Sara Barielles' song BRAVE. To YES is to be BRAVE.

Watch Sara Barielles: [BRAVE](#) on YouTube.

## **Z is for Zip-up Policies and Procedures**

Policy and procedures protect an organization from any one person.

One key to authentic fundraising is to zip-up your policy and procedure to ensure that the funds raised are used to effectively fulfill your mission and bring your organization closer to its vision.

With policy and procedure in place, we can better ensure that we are acting with integrity and transparency. We can better ensure that the organization will act consistently - regardless of who is at the table or in the room. We can better demonstrate how our actions uphold our philosophy and values.

Some policies to consider zipping up:

- Conflict of Interest
- Whistleblower
- Organizational Diversity
- Board Member Nomination
- Document Retention and Destruction
- Social Media
- Gift Acceptance
- Donor Thank You
- No Contact
- Donor Privacy

*Which policies and procedures could you zip-up to make your fundraising more effective?*