Ten Important Lessons in Asking for Charitable Gifts

By Dr. Bill DeWalt

Like books about how to become successful in business, how-to books about fundraising for non- profits have multiplied over the past several decades. As helpful as some of these works are about the mechanics of establishing and maintaining a fundraising apparatus, precious little has been written about what happens or should happen during the face-to-face meeting between non-profit leaders/volunteers and donors, the time when a specific gift is requested -- the "High Noon" of fundraising. In this article, we will focus on ten lessons for what should and should not happen when we ask for a gift.

It is important to recognize that asking people for support is the result of a long process, not something that happens overnight. A general guideline in fundraising is that it takes at least six meaningful contacts before a request can be made. That is why organizations are constantly having "cultivation" events to give potential donors the opportunity to develop a connection with, and hopefully, a passion for the institution. In order for this process to be successful, the organization's staff, Board, and leadership must all be involved in preparing and advocating for the project. Indeed, perhaps the first rule of successful fundraising is that it takes a village, or at least a talented team, to make good things happen.

Although many people may be involved with project development, when it comes to "the ask," a much smaller team is actually present. Sometimes just the leader of the organization is there, but ideally one or more volunteers (usually Board members) are also present. Often it is one of them who makes the actual gift request. A senior development professional (or, in smaller non-profits, the only development person) may also be there. It is to all the individuals involved in the actual request for a gift that this article is aimed.

1. Understand your project and organization and be able to market them well.

In his book, Managing the Non-Profit, Peter Drucker noted that most non-profits are woefully ignorant about "market knowledge." Passionate non-profit leaders firmly believe that what they are doing merits support, but many are unable to articulate to others the importance of the project and why donors should contribute to it. A considerable amount of hard work needs to be done to consider how we are going to make others aware of the project, the resources it

requires, and especially, how the donors' support of the initiative will lead to some greater benefit for society.

Accomplishing a goal in fundraising begins long before the first request is made. If you can articulate quickly, passionately, and convincingly why your project should be done, you will have much more success.

For example, the effort to create new dinosaur halls and compelling exhibits at Carnegie Museum of Natural History was greatly assisted when proponents repeated catch-phrases such as "over 250 million years in the making," "creating a first-day attraction for the city of Pittsburgh," and "bringing the quality of the exhibits up to the quality of the collection." By emphasizing the project as Dinosaurs in Their World, the idea that dinosaurs would be surrounded with the plants and animals of their era was succinctly conveyed. Developing and honing such messages is hard work and often involves soliciting ideas from others, bouncing initial thoughts off members of the community, and continually being open to the ideas of others. The newly created Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, for example, spent months looking for a way to convey the quality of the experience. When a photographer working with the public relations team came back from a photo shoot and said this is "the most extraordinary museum you'll ever hear,' everyone agreed that the phrase captured the museum's experience. Such quick phrases and taglines can convey hard-hitting messages about your project that are both impactful and memorable.

Before meeting with potential donors to ask for a gift, the hard work of raising awareness about what is being supported and its importance should already have been done. That said, it will be essential for one of the solicitation team members to quickly and passionately articulate to the donor the purpose for which their gift will be used. Developing and repeating memorable catch- phrases is an important element of effective requests.

2. Know your audience, so that you are prepared for the meeting.

A young development director had an important meeting with the managing partner of a law firm whose financial assistance was important to a major building project. During the meeting, which was an initial discussion to get acquainted, the potential donor made it clear that he had done some investigation and knew quite a lot about the fundraiser's background. When he asked the fundraiser how much he knew about himself, the fundraiser could only stumble around, revealing how little he knew. The donor kindly let him know a bit about his considerable involvement in supporting the arts and culture in the city and suggested in a gentle way that successful requests for support begin with knowing a substantial amount about those to whom requests are being made.

It is not enough to have a great initiative about which you can talk knowledgably and passionately. You also need to have a sense about how your project might appeal to each person or institution you are soliciting. In the case of foundations, knowing their guidelines and how your needs fit within those guidelines is, of course, paramount. In the case of individuals it

may require a good deal of effort to research their other philanthropic interests, their hobbies and passions, their previous level of engagement with your organization and similar projects, the interests of key family members, etc. But such information is critically important in determining which elements of your project will best resonate with them and should be featured in your case for support.

3. Do not over-stretch in your donor gift request.

Fundraising professionals, especially those working with capital campaigns, often argue that asking donors to make "stretch gifts" is an important element of successful campaigns. That is, the largest gift that the donor might possibly make should be the target of the request. Many donors, however, react negatively to, or are insulted by, a request that they view as beyond what they consider appropriate. Others may feel embarrassed because they cannot or will not commit to a gift of that size. We must, however, understand both the capacity and the willingness to give. As fundraisers, our perspective should be to consider any gift as not just a "one-off" that will never be repeated, but as the first (or second or third) investment in the organization.

Although we may sometimes not get the maximum gift of which a donor is capable, our goal should always be to develop a long-term relationship with that individual. As the relationship strengthens, additional contributions are likely to follow.

4. Script your solicitation visit and how you would like it to proceed.

Proper preparation extends to preparing an agenda or schedule of the visit. This is particularly important when multiple individuals are involved in making the request. Every person should know why they are present, what their role will be, and who will be charged with keeping the meeting on track. It is often helpful for the group making the request to get together beforehand to rehearse what will be said and by whom. Every meeting will always deviate from the script but your team's ability to adjust on the fly will be enhanced if they all understand what needs to be accomplished. Don't let one person's enthusiasm or communication style monopolize the conversation, even if that person has the closest relationship with the potential donor, especially if they are not covering the points that need to be made. Particularly important is that someone must actually ask the donor to consider a specific donation. Talking in general terms about the organization and the benefits of a gift is not enough. Ideally, the person making the request should be a Board member or volunteer who has already made a gift of their own. If you know your potential donor well (Lesson 2), you will have a good idea if they are more likely to respond to the organization's leader or a supportive and committed volunteer making the case for support.

5. Do not promise something the organization may not be able to deliver or administer.

In another example, a donor had been cultivated for months and was in discussions about a major gift. When it came time for the actual request to be made, he reported that he was

willing to make the donation only if he could keep the money in an account that he would manage. Being in the financial business, he had more confidence in his own abilities to manage the resources. Although the donation was significant, many complications would arise if this was allowed to happen. Ultimately, the donor had to be told that while his position and his offer were much appreciated, it would not be possible to accept the gift under those conditions. Fortunately, several months later, the individual reconsidered and made the gift outright to the organization.

The case above illustrates an unusual situation in which administrative difficulties would have arisen with conditions imposed on a gift. Much more common, however, is that donors ask an organization to take on a project that it is ill-equipped to mount or to manage. The institution must carefully consider whether the project or program fits with its mission and its capabilities. If the answer is no, then it should politely decline rather than face embarrassment (or worse) down the road by poorly using the gift.

Another common problem is that many cultural organizations over-reach in terms of their aspirations and what they promise. They plan projects that are simply too expensive for their donor base to support. There are several examples of organizations embarking on projects of this kind. Cost estimates keep rising, anticipated funding doesn't come through, and the project either is canceled or becomes a huge burden on the organization and community. As Willem Brans has articulated in his article, "Are Your Ready for a Cultural Facility Project?" it is imperative that organizations are reasonably certain that the facilities and projects they plan are commensurate with the financial resources they are able to raise. This does not just apply to major capital projects but to smaller efforts as well. It is far better to under-promise and over- deliver than the opposite. As donors recognize that the organization consistently achieves what it promises (or more than it promises), they will gain confidence and be willing to invest their resources in the institution.

6. Do not disparage other organizations or people when you are making a request.

People give to causes with which they connect and that they view as worthy. Trying to dissuade them from giving to another organization and giving to yours instead is not likely to be efficacious.

If a donor is committed to providing funds to help the homeless or help sick children, we should applaud their efforts while adopting the attitude and making the case that our project is equally compelling. If a donor is already passionate about supporting some other cause, it will only create bad feelings and resentment to make disparaging remarks about that organization. The goal should be to show the merits of your project and the positive benefits it will bring, not to minimize or critique another organization's work.

7. Listen carefully.

While working on a capital campaign for a major museum building project the Executive Director met with a family foundation representative who was impressed with the proposed project but made it clear that the foundation never contributed to capital projects (Lesson 2 not previously learned in this case). The foundation representative began talking about the many buildings being constructed that did not adequately plan for ongoing maintenance. He railed about how many institutions found it difficult to find the money to fix existing buildings and even provide heat and cooling for them. Fortunately, as part of the planning for a new building, the institution had decided to create an endowment to fund both eventual maintenance and the increased heating and cooling costs of the building addition. The Executive Director explained this to the donor and, after several follow up discussions, the donor agreed to contribute money if it were dedicated to the building maintenance endowment fund. The gift was even larger than the initial request.

Most good fundraisers are good listeners. In a gift solicitation, we are selling our project but we should also be giving donors the opportunity to reveal what is important to them and what they are willing to do. Be flexible and creative in matching your organization's needs with the capacity and interest of your supporters. In some cases, even though they may not be able to directly respond to a specific request, what they are willing to do can significantly support some other project or align perfectly with the organization's broader goals.

8. Do not take rejection as a final no.

A museum prepared a pitch for an exhibition it wanted to organize to a donor with the capacity to give a substantial sum. The organization's leadership felt the individual would be supportive because he owned several objects that could be featured in the exhibit. The individual quickly assented to lending the objects but, rather than the relatively modest amount requested, agreed to give only a third of what was needed. Although several elements originally planned for the project could not be included in the final exhibition, through the amazing work of its exhibits team the show was mounted and was a huge success. A few years later, the same individual was approached for a major endowment grant to support traveling exhibits and agreed to give the full sum requested, noting how pleased he had been with the beautiful execution of the earlier exhibit.

A seeming rejection turned into many multiples of dollars in capital campaign support because the individual gained confidence in the organization and its leadership.

In the fundraising world, we all have to learn to live with disappointment and rejection. What we have to keep in mind, however, is that a "no" to a request is seldom as absolute as that might seem. Remember that if someone agreed to see you, particularly if they knew you would be accompanied by a Board member or development professional, it is likely that he or she knew what was coming and was willing to listen. If a prospective donor does not respond to a particular request, it may be they only need more time to consider it more fully or to become

more confident in the institution's leadership and capabilities. In the case above, what was perceived as a rejection was, in fact, a success. The organization received some support for the initial exhibit and, after the donor became more familiar with its capabilities, eventually received a major gift.

9. Discuss follow up and next steps in the process.

Everyone has been in meetings that end with no resolution. Any seasoned fundraiser has participated in meetings in which donors seem disengaged and disinclined to proffer their support.

Following up on such meetings later can be awkward and sometimes compounds the problems encountered in the meeting itself. One way of avoiding the uncertainty and awkwardness of such later follow-up calls is to cover next steps in the final phase of the meeting itself. In terms of the "script" discussed above, it is important that someone be tasked with the role of summarizing the meeting and, most importantly, saying when someone from the organization will follow up with the prospective donor. This lets the donor know that someone will be calling and makes it more likely that they will give the request serious thought in the interim.

The acknowledgment letter sent thanking the potential donor for the meeting provides another opportunity for outlining next steps. In almost all cases, the most important next step will be for the head of the organization or a key Board member to follow up with the individual to ask whether they have thought about the request. That phone call also offers the opportunity to answer any questions the prospective donor may have that resulted from the meeting. These calls should not be in the nature of pressuring someone to make a decision, but rather to continue an ongoing dialogue about the project and the organization.

10. Continue your engagement with donors after the gift has been made.

Obtaining a major gift or grant from a donor is a cause for celebration. But while it marks the successful completion of one process, it also ushers in the beginning of another: effective stewardship. The organization must establish formal and informal ways to express appreciation for the impact of the gift and develop strategies for making the individual who gave it feel like a true partner of the organization. Turnover of leaders and of development personnel in institutions makes this problematic, but a key part of assuming a new position is to become acquainted with donors and their history with the organization. For any leader, it is crucial to know about the individuals and gifts that supported the organization before you arrived and continue thanking people even if you are not the one who requested and received the contribution. It is also good practice when you leave an organization to let donors know how much you appreciated their support during your tenure there and, if the opportunity arises at some time in the future, to continue expressing your thanks. Expressing appreciation is key to future fundraising success.

CONCLUSION

Leaders and development professionals at many organizations focus on the mechanics of establishing and managing fundraising operations, putting organizational structures in place, developing tailored software packages, and producing fancy case statements and brochures. Ultimately however, "people give to people" and it is in the critical final step of the cultivation process that many mistakes are made. This article discusses many of the most common issues in donor meetings and presents ten lessons derived from experience. Keeping in mind the above lessons when you are in the final stage of asking for a gift will increase the chances of success.

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