

## 9 Principles of Community-Centric Fundraising

Like 514



*[Image description: Some sort of duck, standing on what looks like a wooden post, overlooking a pond. The duck is looking to our right. It has light brown feathers on its head and back, white belly, and its wings are brown with orange-red feathers, with a little bit of neon green peeking through. Its tail feathers are black. The top of its head is gray, and there is a streak of white highlighted with black curving down from the back of its head to its neck. This is one cute little duck. In the background, out of focus, are two white ducks swimming. Image obtained from Pixabay.com]*

Hi everyone. After last week's post, I got a lot of comments, many in support, a few cautiously curious, and some strong disagreement. Which is all awesome, because we can disagree on many things, but I think the conversation around equity as it's applied to fundraising is much needed. I also want to reiterate how much respect I have for the fundraisers in our field. I've said it before that I think you have to be pretty brilliant to be a successful fundraising professional, considering how complex this work is. I also want to reaffirm how much I appreciate donors, and that my critique of donor-centrism in no way precludes respect for donors, just like my critique of [inequitable funding practices](#) should not mean a disrespect for foundations or program officers, or my post on how [data has been used to perpetuate inequity](#) should not be seen as a dis on evaluators and researchers.

Today, I want to lay out a few preliminary thoughts on Community-Centric Fundraising. I was hoping to work on this further and present a tighter set of principles later, but because so many are curious, I thought I'd set down a few tentative points, based on the conversations and input I've had so far.

Special thanks to [AFP Calgary and Area](#) and Banff Compass 2017, Amy Varga of [Varga Consulting](#), Emily Anthony and Julie Edsforth of [Clover Search Works](#), Erica Mills of [Claxon Marketing](#), my friends in the Seattle chapter of [EDHH](#), my staff, and other amazing colleagues, especially fundraisers of color, who provided thoughts, including disagreement. (It should be noted that the colleagues listed here helped me to think, but it does not necessarily mean they agree with everything presented here).

Again, these principles and sample actions below are tentative, and will change and evolve as we have more conversations, including likely some more healthy arguments:

## Principles of Community-Centric Fundraising:

**Principle 1: Fundraising must be grounded in Race, Equity, and Social Justice.** The conversations around fundraising must move beyond diversifying donors and tapping into marginalized communities to give, toward sometimes uncomfortable discussions regarding race and wealth disparities, etc. Many of us are having these conversations with our boards, colleagues, even volunteers. Donors, however, have mainly been exempt from participating in these crucial conversations, which is a disservice to our donors, and to the sector:

- All fundraising professionals must be trained in anti-racism, systemic oppression, equity, wealth disparity, intersectionality, and other areas important to social justice
- Where we can, we encourage donors to think about the above topics, and their roles and privileges within these areas, understanding that people are on different points on various continua.
- We invest in fundraisers who come from the communities that we serve
- Larger organizations must be cognizant of their roles and minimize inequitable practices like Trickle-Down Community Engagement, where they absorb the majority of the funding and donations and filter down small amounts to organizations led by marginalized communities who do the significant community engagement work.

**Principle 2: Individual missions are not as important as the collective community.** We have all been trained to prioritize our organization's mission first, to raise as much money as possible for our individual missions. But our missions are interrelated, and the community is best served if we see ourselves as part of a larger ecosystem working collectively to build a just society:

- We avoid fundraising and other practices that create a "tragedy of the commons," where our organization benefits, but it negatively affects the entire sector and thus community.
- We are thoughtful about which grants we apply to and which donors we take on, and sometimes decline funding opportunities so that other organizations that do critical work in the community have a better chance if it best serves the community.
- We check annually to see if our mission is still relevant and responsive to community needs,
- We adjust or merge or even shut down if our presence negatively affects our community
- We invest in staff and board not just so they are effective at our organization, but so that they are effective in the sector and can build bridges between organizations

**Principle 3: Nonprofits are generous with and mutually supportive of one another:** Nonprofits see and treat one another not as competitors (for the most part), but as critical partners with the common mission of strengthening the community.

- We do not let fear, scarcity mindset, or survival tendencies drive our decisions and actions when relating to other organizations
- We collaborate with organizations whose missions are interconnected with ours and support them to ensure they are also strong
- We introduce our donors to other nonprofits as appropriate
- We share grant opportunities and funder relationships as appropriate
- We give credit to other nonprofits publicly

- We collaborate and support one another during fundraising galas and other events
- We generously share resources, ideas, and promising practices in fundraising and other areas

**Principle 4: All elements that strengthen community are equally valued and appreciated:** We respect, appreciate, recognize, and build relationship with our donors, and we use those same principles with others in the sector, including staff, board members, volunteers, and clients:

- Our staff play a critical role in building a strong and just community. We compensate them fairly, invest in their growth, and appreciate them as much as we appreciate donors.
- Our boards play critical roles in this work. We appreciate our board members as much as we appreciate our other donors.
- Our volunteers provide valuable skills and work and help to strength our community. We appreciate our volunteers as much as we appreciate donors.
- We see our clients not just as recipients of our services but vital contributors to the community. We appreciate our clients as much as we appreciate donors.

**Principle 5: Time is valued equally as money:** Time is the only resource we cannot make more of, and thus the donation of time must be valued as much as the donation of money:

- We appreciate those who contribute time, and talent, and connections to marginalized communities as much as we appreciate those who contribute money
- We understand that especially for many marginalized community members who may not have the financial means to contribute to an organization, the gift of time is significant and should be treated as such
- We recognize and acknowledge when team members put in a lot more time than they are getting paid for, which happens a lot in our sector and can lead to burnout. (We send a handwritten thank-you note to donors after galas, for example, and often ignore the development staff who work 30 unpaid extra hours during gala week. Maybe it should be standard practice to write them a nice note too).

**Principle 6: We respect our donors' integrity and treat donors as partners, which means occasionally pushing back:** I've seen and been in so many conversations where fundraisers indicate a fear of having honest conversations with donors. But I don't think we can do this work effectively if we can't have honest, respectful conversations, including strong disagreements as needed, with our donors:

- We provide opportunities for donors to further their understanding of the complexity of this work
- We respectfully and firmly push back when donors do or say things that may be detrimental to our work or to the community we are serving
- We are honest and transparent with our donors about the resources that it takes to comply with their wishes and to maintain relationships, and push back when that becomes excessive
- We do not adhere to donors' wishes if it ever comes at the expense of our clients and community

**Principle 7: We foster a sense of belonging in our fundraising work; we avoid treating anyone as an "other":** We need to be careful to avoid "othering" the people we serve and reinforcing the savior complex. We

use fundraising to ensure everyone feel a sense of belonging:

- We authentically partner with our community members when asking them to be involved in fundraising efforts
- We are thoughtful of the impact on our community members when we ask them to share their stories for fundraising purposes
- We are thoughtful about what images we use on our website, brochures, social media, etc., in order to avoid reinforcing the existing archetypes and stereotypes.
- We use “we,” the collective “we” that includes the donor as part of the community doing this work. (I’m not against “you,” but sometimes it’s excessive. We need to balance out the “you” with the collective “we.”)

**Principle 8: We believe, and we encourage donors to believe, that we all benefit from this work:** Some call it “Enlightened Self-Interest,” this belief that by investing in others and in the common good, we also personally benefit, versus just compassion or a sense of pity. Getting donors to see they and their families personally benefit from their donations will lead to stronger investment in their community, which will strengthen the community:

- We avoid creating a sense of charity or pity among donors toward other community members, and instead encourage donors to see how they and their families also benefit from the work they are donating to to sustain
- [A really important point, but I can’t remember what it is, because it’s 1am. I’ll have to come back to this later]

**Principle 9: We believe and encourage donors to believe, that the work is holistic, not a collection of isolated segments:** We need to get people to see the work as a whole, not reinforce transactional thinking, which focuses on the split between program costs and “overhead,” as well as the division of our clients into discreet units supported by different individual donors. We need to get donors to see and appreciate that many elements are needed to make things run.

- We are transparent with financial reporting, but whenever possible, to report holistically, not segmented out by which donors paid for what. E.g., “Your \$1,000, combined with the funding from grants and other donors, along with support with volunteers and staff, helped us serve 300 kids this year.” Not “Your \$1,000 bought books and equipment for 10 kids, and none of your money went to overhead.”
- We encourage funders to understand and support core mission support, i.e., “overhead” or “indirect” expenses
- We do not exaggerate how low our core support expenses are, as this affects everyone in the sector.
- We avoid saying things like “We got a funder/donor to underwrite this event 100% of your donations go to programs/services.”

Let me know your thoughts in the comment: What resonates with you, what you disagree with, what you think needs to be added or changed. You can also email me at [vu@nonprofitaf.com](mailto:vu@nonprofitaf.com)

Thanks so much, everyone, for engaging in this important conversation, even when we don't agree on everything.

And before I go, just a reminder that this May 25<sup>th</sup> is Get a Beer and Undo Nonprofit Power Dynamics Day (GBUNPD, the best acronym ever), where funders (including trustees) and nonprofits are encouraged to get a beer or ice cream together informally with no agenda, just to talk with one another like fellow human beings and help reduce this oppressive power dynamics so prevalent in our sector. I know a bunch of cities across the US are having various events (some with donuts, apparently; good work, Boston! You and your baby wheels) It's not too late to plan something, since it's completely informal. Please take pictures and tag #GBUNPD on social media.

(Next week is Memorial Day, so the regular Monday post will be delayed to Tuesday)

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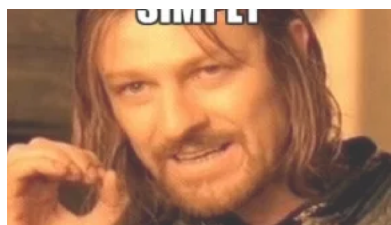
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Also, join **Nonprofit Happy Hour**, a peer support group on Facebook, and if you are an ED/CEO, join **ED Happy Hour**. These are great forums for when you have a problem and want to get advice from colleagues, or you just want to share pictures of unicorns. Check them out.

**Donate, or give a grant, to Vu's organization**, Rainier Valley Corps, which has the mission of bringing more leaders of color into the nonprofit sector and getting diverse communities to work together to address systemic issues.

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