

The ABCD of a changemaking fundraiser

It is the blending of authenticity, boldness, creativity and drive that is the basis for excellence in fundraising, says nonprofit management specialist **Usha Menon**.



My 29 years as a fundraiser and working with fundraisers across continents have strengthened my view that the success of fundraising in most parts depends on the characteristics of the fundraiser. Here are my thoughts on change-making fundraisers.

AUTHENTICITY

Being authentic is about the credibility in one's words and behaviour, and an absence of pretence. It is about our values and character that's based on our inner self, rather than our outward style. These values ensure that we, as fundraisers, are explorers and more passionate about discovering collaborators than being a conqueror out on a donor acquisition mission.

There is a lot of talk about targeting, segmenting, acquiring and cultivating. These are terms that would not normally be used when discussing people. How can we be authentic if in our office environment we use this language and yet with donors we try to be 'donor-centric'? Would we use these terms when referring to our personal friends, well-wishers and collaborators?

Part of being authentic is also about having discipline, as passion without diligence and competence does not bring results. In the Asian traditions and scriptures, the ultimate goal of life is knowledge (not happiness), as with knowledge comes the necessary awareness to take the right actions in the right circumstances, which ensures success. If we do not know what we stand for, how will we ever stand up for things that matter to us?

Let our authenticity create the energy that volunteers, staff, donors, collaborators and the community want to rally around.

Authenticity, however, requires courage.

BOLDNESS

A 'no' uttered from the deepest conviction is better than a 'yes' merely uttered to please or, worse, to avoid trouble – Mahatma Gandhi.

A lot has been said about donor-centric fundraising. However, oftentimes, many donors are genuinely confused or ill-prepared to make decisions about their contribution and commitment to address the needs of the community. Hence being 'impact-centric' and working with our donors and supporters to help

them understand how their efforts and gifts will impact people and our planet is our duty, as the primary point of contact between the potential donor and the social impact organisation.

I still remember the day when I left the negotiation table of a grant-making entity, which had agreed on a \$10 million grant, however with a caveat that the management and fundraising expenses that were part of the budget could not be covered by their grant.

My response was, "While we would love to work with you and we know that together we can impact the community, I see that I have failed to educate you on the importance of the costs of staff, technology and outreach for the effective delivery of the life-changing programs. That being the case, I feel we are not yet qualified to accept your grant."

That decision could have cost me my job! However, we got a call after three days asking us to return to the discussion, as their board accepted the relevance of the costs being included in the budget and, in fact, wanted to increase its grant to \$12 million.

Being bold, when it is the right thing to do, is a responsibility of the fundraiser. Donors can then see us as collaborators, on the same side of the table, working for a common impact-centric purpose.

CREATIVITY

Creativity is just connecting things. Creative people are able to connect experiences they've had and synthesise new things – Steve Jobs.

How are we as changemakers connecting the dots around us – in our community, in our country and across the world – to learn, teach, share and do things together, so that the impact of our collective efforts can be larger than our individual endeavours?

Asian traditions and lifestyles have, since time immemorial, had a strong focus on meditation, yoga and mindfulness that focuses on being 'present', non-judgemental, and being connected by similarity of needs and experience. These are the very elements that help creativity to thrive. Unfortunately, impressed by modern management theories of 'thinking out of the box', many of us have begun putting ourselves into a box, just so we can get out of it!

I see that creativity suffers when the fundraiser gets too impressed by the methodology. In

doing so, the reason for the fundraising is lost and, because of this, donors and supporters feel a lack of involvement and move on.

DRIVE

While commercial businesses want to kill their competitors, social-impact organisations should focus on killing the problems. This calls for us to collaborate, instead of compete – Jack Sim, Founder, World Toilet Organization.

Drive is the energy that comes from within. It is a self-motivation that is not merely about propelling oneself to 'acquire' donors, but in having the patience and a plan to find the best way to address the needs in our community and the world, with all who can play a vital part.

This resourcefulness means maintaining strong relationships and benefiting from the knowledge of a wide network, as a person with drive is not afraid to ask for help or guidance. This engagement with donors, supporters and well-wishers leads to an emotional connection that is vital, as it embraces the network as collaborators in the impact the group envisions.

Here is an Indian fundraising analogy from ancient Sanskrit scriptures, from which I derive lessons on engagement. It is about Ganesha and his brother, Kartikeya, who were tasked by their parents to go around the world three times.

While Kartikeya set out immediately, circumambulating the globe as instructed, Ganesha chose to walk around his parents, Shiva and Parvati, with great devotion three times. When asked by Kartikeya to explain his action, he replied, "You chose to go around 'the world', I did so around 'my world'." Ganesha was pronounced the victor of this task by his parents as they felt a compelling emotional connection to Ganesha's version of the task, as it ensured the engagement with the key stakeholders.

I hope these characteristics of an effective fundraiser resonates with your experience. **F&P**



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