

Relationships: The North Star of Fundraising

By Nila Vehar, Senior Counsel

Chief Executive Officers and Board Members of nonprofit organizations juggle many responsibilities. I imagine that some days you think your to-do list will be completed and other days not! Add raising dollars to the mix of leadership, management and program implementation, your responsibility takes on a greater sense of urgency, commitment, and patience.

I know that most organizations work on a 12-month budget cycle. I've often thought that there should be a three-year parallel budget for assessing and adopting new ideas to meet financial goals. It often takes much longer than a year to achieve new and major funding. We should always try and meet our annual budgeted goals, but it does help to set longer-term priorities for donor cultivation, expectations, and stewardship. We can learn a lot about the impact that strong donor relationships have on our ability to sustain and grow funding.

Taking a break to focus on lessons learned will reenergize and motivate staff and the Board. It can help recalibrate and set new goals when appropriate. Talking about and managing expectations should be included in each of our job descriptions. Our work and personal lives depend on strong relationships. Colleagues, friends, a spouse, partner, or pet rely on our care, support, and loyalty.

The same is true for donors who support our organizations, mission, and work. Fundraising can be a menacing term for many non-profit CEO's and Board Members. How many times have you heard this phrase? 'I hate to ask people for money.' Funding will follow when you fulfill the mission, purpose, and services of your organization. What you give is almost always more than you take.

Donors give because they care, they or their loved ones have been helped and they trust you, your staff and Board.

What influences the decision to give? Ask a few people and they will tell you. Have story sharing day when staff imparts what they hear and learn from donors and non-donors. What keeps these folks engaged in your mission? A lot can be learned from the people you serve.

Many of the donors I have grown to know and love speak truth to power when they say, 'please slow down with your requests for funding'. Yet, if we don't ask we can't guarantee the necessary funding to support important programs and services.

Nonprofit organizations vary in their size, mission, and purpose. The National Center for Charitable Statistics reports that more than 1.5 million non-profit organizations are _____

registered in the United States. Some are very large; others are very small. The needs for these non-profits are significant and growing. The methods of securing funding are rapidly changing with the introduction of fast-paced social media. We must have an appropriate and clear strategy for adding social media to mix of fund development.

Development is the art of fundraising. It is the real workhorse for meeting financial goals. Development is cultivating, stewarding, knowing, and appealing to your donor's interest. For Board members, it is worth taking the time to know and understand your donors. Raising money quickly is rare. It takes time, testing and learning. One thing that is not rare is the powerful voice of those who support you. They are your best friends and advocates. Please invite them to be part of your fund development effort by telling their compelling stories. These stories are often brilliant and vibrant. They help us become more attentive to our work and enable us to use the gift of words for donor engagement and support.

Health care, human rights, education, animal rescue, rare diseases, the arts, and many more non-profit organizations have passionate supporters. Find them, talk with them, and get them involved in your cause. You will be amazed at their level of commitment and willingness to help!

I recall many conversations I had with patients, spouses, and family members while I served as Director of Donor Relations for the Aplastic Anemia and MDS International Foundation. Their stories of hope, courage, laughter and sometimes sadness were the best reflection of our work.

The people we all serve deserve our best fund development efforts. Not always easy, but always worth the time and attention.

The vibrancy of the nonprofit community depends upon many things, including your service, skill, and commitment. Thank you joining this vibrant community of dedicated volunteers and staff.

I welcome and look forward to your feedback.

On a personal note, I am honored to join DeWitt & Associates to support the advancement of knowledge, nourishing, and care of the nonprofit community.