

OPINION

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Fundraising Is Stalled by Its Focus on What Works for White Men

By Kathleen Loehr



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Worrisome trends are emerging in U.S. philanthropy. Although overall charitable giving is growing, the share of Americans who give is declining, and the incidence of giving is down in most every age group.

This giving gap opened because of complex reasons, but one thing is clear: We are seeing fewer Americans give because we are applying the same approaches we've used since the 1960s to today's very diverse donors. It is time to look

in the mirror at our fundraising practices and see what needs to change.

What I see in that mirror is a philanthropic landscape where we as fundraisers have become highly skilled at applying well-honed strategies developed for wealthy, largely white, and largely male donors. These practices work well for that group: We raised over \$400 billion in 2017. So we have positive reinforcement of our behaviors and keep turning to them. However, those techniques may not work best for many other types of donors. Our fundraising may be too pale, male, and stale.

Modern U.S. fundraising began around the 1960s, when the prototypical donor was a white, straight male. Most fundraising was done at universities, where alumni and others responded best to approaches that involved competition, deadlines, recognition, board positions, and peer pressure.

As universities gained confidence in fundraising, these approaches become part of every campus playbook. Eventually, other nonprofits copied the university approaches, and the ideas spread as consultants and staff members moved from universities to other nonprofits.

Almost 60 years later, many annual appeals still include lines like "Please give before June 30." Donation levels to be part of a "giving society" are often created with a focus on name recognition and access to leaders. Campaigns start setting goals from the top down. Galas often have a short and intense "pledge your gift now" segment during which individuals quickly raise their hands or paddles to give, urged on by the pressure of the time constraint and what others are pledging. These approaches work well — but only for a portion of the donor pool.

From my own work in women's philanthropy, I know that these tried-and-true fundraising practices can either alienate women or gain only minimal support from them. I've learned that women give generously (and, contrary to popular opinion, give more than their male counterparts) but have different preferences than men when it comes to cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship. These findings come from years of research on women donors by the Women's Philanthropy Institute at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

We also have decades' worth of research about a wide variety of other philanthropic preferences in our donor pools. And yet, despite these documented differences, we often still apply the same approach to most donors, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. Simply knowing how donor groups prefer to make a difference is clearly not enough to raise significant money and support from them. If it were, we'd already be doing it.

This is not about one person doing anything wrong. It is about all of us facing the reality that these fundraising practices are seared into us. All the ways we learned how to raise money from primarily white men went beyond simple replication. They became codified functional skills required in our profession. None of us can break free without becoming keenly aware of the hundreds of processes these practices have generated and then grappling with the impact on today's donors.

Change doesn't happen when we've gained knowledge. Change happens when we use that knowledge to act differently. Only when we consistently behave differently will we begin to optimize how we build relationships with a wide variety of donors.

How can we start this change? Here are some suggestions:

Commit to Change.

Diversity is not about one person being asked to pay attention to diverse donors. Too many new efforts struggle when led by a single midlevel staff member (often juggling other priorities) who lacks strong leadership backing from the organization.

Key decision makers must show their support. When leaders take a strong stand and persuasively declare the change they wish to see, their compelling vision can pull others in the organization into new behaviors, conversations, actions, and processes.

Use Data to Become Aware.

You cannot act successfully if you remain unaware. Research and your own data can help break through assumptions and myths you might hold.

Read and discuss research about how diverse groups of donors prefer to engage with causes they care about or how they make their philanthropic decisions. With the research in hand, explore your own data to see if any of your donors' giving patterns mirror what you've learned. For instance, if research tells us that millennial women are giving more consistently than millennial men, analyze if they are giving more to you. If so, how are they giving to you? You might be overlooking an opportunity for cultivating support from this group. Traditional analysis can miss opportunities like this.

Rumble With What You Learn.

Don't just move into action after you've reviewed research and data. I like Brené Brown's approach to moving through change. In her book *Rising Strong*, she writes that we need to "rumble" with our stories to find the truth. Rumbling begins with deep inquiry, shirt sleeves rolled up, shoulder to shoulder with colleagues, and straight talk about what we know or don't know and what barriers might be getting in the way of our goals — in this case, growing support from a wide range of donors.

Leaders can put together a diverse group to help rumble with what you are learning, before bringing forward recommendations. They can be diverse in their cultural backgrounds, titles, and styles of learning and processing. Optimally they are a mix of staff, volunteers, and donors. Empower them to learn about the research and discuss what they are learning. Ask them to explore how commonly used approaches might stymie change. Dig into stories about relationship building that failed and why as well as the successes.

Also, speak to your donors and other key constituents from diverse backgrounds. Share their voices and feedback with your group. Listening to those who care about your mission is critical. How do they feel about their relationship to your organization? What are they saying about you? What do they care about? How can you gain more of their voice and input? What is working and what is missing? Learning to listen more openly to each other and your supporters brings deeper understanding as well as guideposts for what can be done differently.

Mastering these three steps will reward you with truly different understanding and conversations. You will have fundraisers who are now aware of the need to change behavior, not just add new tips. And you will have created a village of people in your organization, from the leader on down, who are now curious, can ask questions, are engaged, can bring forward its support, and will work with you to design ways to connect differently with diverse donors. Attention and awareness are no small outcomes. They are the beginning we need to build fundraising practices that resonate with diverse donors.

Recognize that every demographic group has been shaped differently by their gender, sexual orientation, race, age, or ethnicity. No one group of donors is better than the others; they are all simply different. And they deserve different conversations, visits, and ways of being involved.

Shaking up our standard operating procedures is not an easy task. To do things differently may bring up resistance inside ourselves or from others who are evaluating us — change is uncomfortable. As you recognize that we are starting with a structured system shaped by historic practices, founded in how a certain group of men give, also remember that we created that system through learning, trial and error, and copying what works. Therefore, we can again learn, try, and share what we find.

It is time all nonprofits make a powerful commitment to growing engagement and support from all our donors, not just from those we are comfortable with now. We must adapt our fundraising if we want to close, not widen, the burgeoning giving gap.

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