

Cultivating meaningful donor relationships for NPO development directors

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Relationship is an interesting word in this changing time of social networking. People join networks as a friend or a fan of people they don't even know. As a development director of a non-profit organization, you know it's not the quantity of the relationships but the quality of those relationship that counts. For any organization to grow, you need long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships.

Whether online or face-to-face, your approach to developing donor relationships should first begin with the relationship you have with yourself and then how that relationship is portrayed to potential and existing donors. Relationships build on trust, clarity and joy have the greatest chance of success. There are five tips for developing donor relationships that will help you and your organization thrive:

1) Build trust by being on time, being consistent and being generous with your attention. Continually question yourself about your intentions. Soft eye contact gives people the indication that they 're being seen and heard. Your ability to breathe in the silence (without needing to fill it with unnecessary chatter) will grant people space to respond thoughtfully. In our society, most people have been conditioned to think they're building relationships by talking. Talking is essential, but shouldn't turn into a monologue. Nothing of true significance happens without a connection. Take the time to discover something about the other person you admire. Find out what you have in common with them. Build a strong foundation before rushing into action.

2) Get donors involved and create opportunities for on-going interaction. Encourage them to get involved at the level that's exciting for them. People have been taught to say yes when they really mean no. Making it safe to say no creates honest dialogue from the beginning. True willingness happens in this kind of environment. To make it easier for donors to commit to your organization, offer different levels of

participation. As you're speaking to them, ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions show people that you care. Closed-ended questions elicit a simple (usually one word) answer and tend to bring little more than compliance. The more you begin with phrases like: tell me more about ... or how do you feel about... or what has been your experience with... the better relationships you'll develop. When you know how to ask specific questions getting to the core of what's really important for them, the better you can gauge the degree they want to participate. Clients I work with learn to ask these types of questions and add certain body language indicating they're open to the speaker's response.

3) Organize your thoughts. Speak about your fund-raising efforts in a clear way that others understand. Make it easy for them by giving them a road map of three main points you'll be covering. There's nothing that breeds confusion more than listening to someone whose thoughts jump from topic to topic. It's just too hard for the listener to track. They get lost and their minds start to wander. They fill in the spaces with assumptions. By organizing your thoughts, having a clear intention and communicating succinctly, there will be no chance of misunderstandings. Clarity lets people know where they stand and is essential to building healthy relationships.

4) Take the attention off yourself. Be more curious about them. Whether you're sending direct appreciation mailings or soliciting new contributions, find ways to make others look good. Not the old way of manipulation, but from a place of genuine care and connection. In my workshops, I've seen some participants who haven't learned to ground themselves first. All their attention is on others, but there's 'no one home'. Others have all their attention on themselves and have nothing left to give others. There are ways to learn about a healthy balance and model it to create refreshing partnerships where everyone wins.

5) Let your passion be contagious. It's invigorating to be with someone who's on a mission. Better yet, to tap into that mission and be a part of it. I read a wedding card recently that said, "Love isn't two people looking at each other, but both gazing out in the same direction." This is so true and applicable for a nonprofit and donor relationship.

Don't keep your passion to yourself. Trust the spark inside you that keeps you going. Don't be afraid to show it. Passion isn't meant to be words on a marketing brochure or website. Development directors need to embody the mission statement and be a walking logo for the organization.