

Take Ten Minutes: Principles to Consider Before Engaging in Fund Raising

By Barry Silverberg*

After taking a speed reading class and reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Woody Allen was asked what the book was about. He responded, "Russia".

Most people would respond a la Woody Allen, that fund raising is about "money". BUT they would be only minimally right.

Fund raising is about far more than asking for money. It is about engaging someone in your cause and giving him or her the opportunity to do good. It is also about organizational credibility. The very process exposes the soul of your organization as you ask others to join you in the journey to do good.

As more and more Austinites support current and yet to be formed nonprofit enterprises, it is useful to take a moment to reflect on some fundamentals which are necessary, though not sufficient, for fund raising success. So many volunteers and agency professionals set out with high hopes and find themselves short of their goal and frustrated.

Many fund raising efforts (also known as "campaigns") have great similarity to the tale told in Shel Silverstein's poem:

The fanciest dive that ever was dove
Was done by Melissa of Coconut Grove.
She bounced on the board and flew into the air
With a twist of her head and a twirl of her hair.
She did thirty-four jackknives, backflipped
and spun,
Quadruple gainered, and reached for the sun."
And then somersaulted nine times
And a quarter—
And looked down and saw that the pool
had no water.

We can describe this as the "Just do it!" school of fund raising. It has energy. It has verve. It is rampant in the nonprofit world. But, it has no planning.

Despite initial indications of imminent success, this

approach crashes. Without a planful approach there can be no long-term, sustained success.

Based on my 25+ years of leadership, management and communications experience in nonprofits, I urge careful consideration and application of the following fundamental principles which are essential for fund raising success. The list is not exhaustive. Once stated most are obvious. Yet, many are often ignored by well-meaning folk eager to go about what they think is a rather common-sense approach to raising money: we are in need ... we do good ... we need money ... good people will give to us!

Principle 1: The purpose of the campaign must be clearly defined and reflect the mission of the sponsoring organization.

The Campaign leadership, campaign workers and donors must readily understand why the fund raising effort is being conducted. Where will the campaign proceeds go? What will be different as a result of the campaign's success? Never forget that fund raising is a means to an end. The sponsoring entity's values, vision and mission define the ends. The fund raising effort must reflect that mission in all of its many dimensions.

Principle 2: The sponsoring entity must have an established legitimacy.

The sponsoring entity must meet generally accepted guidelines for nonprofit operations. These include, but are not limited to: (1) legal incorporation as a non-profit entity; (2) distribution of reports about the agency's activities and services to the public; (3) annual financial audits which are also available to the public; (4) governance by a board of volunteers who meet regularly and keep appropriate records of their actions; (5) conducting fund raising in an ethical and appropriate manner with

a low ratio of fund raising cost to the dollars being raised for the stated purposes of the campaign.

Principle 3: There is goodwill toward the sponsoring entity amongst those who will be asked to contribute to the campaign.

As Gerald Soroker noted in his *Fund Raising for Philanthropy*, “The ability to maintain and develop a reservoir of goodwill will make the difference between a good campaign and a poor campaign ... Where goodwill does not exist it takes several years of planning and careful attention to uncovering the source of previous problems before a major adjustment can be made.”

Principle 4: There is an available cadre willing and able to assume leadership roles in the Campaign.

This is one of the most important principles. Credibility reigns supreme here. The right leadership, which reflects its mettle, is essential to sustained success.

This group of leaders needs to be open to “new” blood for the specific campaign as well as for the entire organization. Again, Soroker is on target when he noted, “This is an area that is crucial. Its importance would seem to be readily apparent. Nevertheless, many an agency and/or organization will come to an annual meeting and look for leadership only to find that no one will take the job or that it is necessary to go back to old leadership. One of the problems that arise comes from the desire of current leadership to retain control of the organization in their hands. It is sad indeed to see an agency with an excellent history of service ignore leadership development. This results often in a poor campaign response and an eventual drying up of its program. The desire of individuals to maintain control, to keep “the outsiders” out, is something that needs to be combated intensively.”

Every fund raising effort must start with the folks at the very core of the sponsoring entity. These “natural prospects” must be fully committed to the fund raising enterprise. They need to be willing to

assume leadership roles. Even more critically, they must be willing to lead!

There are two proclamations that define credible fund raising leadership: “Here I am!” and “Follow me!”.

“Here I am!” reflects one’s willingness to step up to the plate, to put oneself at risk and to do what is deemed necessary for the campaign’s success. This includes meaningful and exemplary giving and working in the campaign.

“Follow me!” proclaims I am here and I am ready to lead by example. I ask no one to do what I have not already done myself. By my actions and my financial contribution, I challenge others to do similarly and to follow. The challenge and enthusiasm becomes contagious.

As the fund raising mantra goes, “people give to people”. People give the most to others they believe and respect. “Here I am!” and “Follow me!” bestow credibility. They provide the leader with “speaking privileges”. Without credibility there is no long-term success.

Principle 5: There is an available and willing corps of volunteers to undertake the rigors of the fund raising effort; and this group needs to be representative of the donor group(s) to be solicited.

Principle 6: There is a willingness and a patience to approach the fund raising enterprise systematically and in a planful fashion. Once defined, all leaders and workers adhere to the Campaign Plan and its fund raising strategies.

Crises do generate donations, but these are only short-term. Annual fund raising drives, as all fund raising, require planning and proper campaign or-

