

FUNdraising Good Times: Start by asking "why?"

Written by Mel and Pearl Shaw
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Part three of three part series on transformational giving

Do major gifts to nonprofits fall from the sky, or are they more typically the result of deep commitment, relationships, and the ability to use the tools and data available to nonprofits? We asked Barbara Pierce, founder of Transformative Giving, about how donor research supports transformational giving.

"Since a transformational gift is one that can move the nonprofit to a different level of operating, it will be a large gift by necessity," she began. "Donor research will identify those donors capable of such a gift so you can focus your cultivation efforts with an aim toward deepening relationships with a small number of top donors. We are all limited by time so you need to prioritize. Donor research allows you to make these choices based on data."

We closed our interview with Pierce asking her to reflect on her experience and share what she has found to be the factors that influence major donor's largest gifts.

"There is so much talk around evaluation and donors do want to know you have a method of determining progress. Beyond these basics, donors making their largest gifts based on advancing the causes that mean the most to them personally and that express their most deeply held values. They are not choosing the organization based solely on their metrics," Pierce commented.

"The desire to leave a legacy beyond their financial success is what I have found influences donors the most. They have more money than they need according to their own standards and they want to make an impact on something bigger than themselves. While it can be a planned gift, transformational gifts are often while the person is alive—the transformation goes both ways in that the donor is changed also through the process."

She shared an experience of visiting with a very prominent venture capitalist who was known to be rather hard-edged. She was armed with reams of data in anticipation of his questions. "I was surprised he was taking the time to see us and I asked why he cared about this environmental cause. He turned to a photo of his children and said, 'all of this doesn't matter if my children can't enjoy the same beauty that I have been so lucky to know.' If I hadn't asked 'why,' we would've missed out on an opportunity to understand what drives him to make transformational gifts."

This led to Pierce's closing remarks and the topic of working with people who can give at the highest levels: "You need to start with the most basic question of 'why?' Otherwise, you may be making a lot of assumptions about what they care about most and gearing your pitch based on your thinking versus theirs."

Visit Barbara Pierce at www.transformativegiving.com .

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Mel and Pearl Shaw are the authors of " [Prerequisites for Fundraising Success](#) ." They position nonprofits for fundraising success. Visit them at

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