

Fear of Fundraising

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In the lives of many nonprofit organizations, a very strong *fear of fundraising* is felt by both board members and staff members alike. Fundraising is an activity that rarely engenders great enthusiasm; at best it is perceived as an obligation that has to be fulfilled or at worst as a burden that people accept reluctantly. More often than not, there is a very strong aversion to speaking to people about money and even more so to asking them to donate their money to a cause or organization.

On the one hand, it is true that soliciting a contribution is not the most comfortable conversation to have with someone, but on the other hand, we would not have the plethora of services in the Jewish community were it not for the generosity of our contributors and supporters. Accepting this means that we have no choice other than to ask people to contribute funds. We have to reframe the “ask” in a way that enables us to overcome our discomfort and engage with potential donors and donors without fearing the process.

Most Americans perceive money as one of the most personal topics we can discuss with others. In general, we do not talk with our friends, let alone with acquaintances, about our salaries, our income from investments, or what we pay for our homes, cars, and possessions. Money is a sensitive issue that we approach in our conversations with great caution.

Yet the North American Jewish community is fortunate that, at least at the communal level, most Jewish leaders realize that they must engage in these sensitive discussions. Most boards of directors of nonprofit organizations understand they have a responsibility for the financial sustainability of their organizations. Although not all members of the boards are involved in direct fundraising, most understand they have an obligation and responsibility to make their own contributions to the organizations on regular basis. This tradition has developed as part of the rich history of the voluntary sector in the United States and Canada.

In Israel, in contrast, people who sit on boards of directors are just beginning to understand that their roles extend beyond identifying with and endorsing the purposes of the nonprofits – that they also set policies and oversee the expenditure of funds. However, most perceive that the responsibility for the fiscal sustainability of the organizations remains in the hands of the directors and staff. Changing this perception is one of the biggest challenges of the nascent third sector in Israeli society.

In both societies very few professional staff members or volunteer leaders, with the exception of those who have direct responsibility for fundraising, actively volunteer to speak to people about making a philanthropic gift to nonprofit organizations. What makes it so difficult to engage people in a discussion of their contributing to a cause or a community service even if they agree with it? What is it about people and money that causes us such great difficulty? Why do we have such trepidation about asking people to *part with their money* in order to assist others, strengthen the community, or support Israel?

One answer to these questions is the way we frame the issue. Asking people to make a philanthropic gift is not about *separating them from their money* but about providing them the chance to respond to those in need or to enhance the lives of other people. When we have a relationship with potential donors and we believe our agency is providing a vital service to the Jewish people of the community, why not give them an opportunity to be part of something that is making a difference in our lives and the lives of other people? When we, as professional staff or volunteer leaders, do not pursue the possibility of obtaining a gift for a specific project or support of an annual campaign, we are denying potential donors a chance to be part of our community.

Often our fear of fundraising is related to the uncomfortable feeling of being turned down. By deciding in advance that the potential donor is not going to give a contribution and so he or she should not be asked, the solicitor is prejudging the person and the situation.

When we do engage in a conversation about giving, at the appropriate time, that discussion should serve several functions simultaneously. It is an opportunity to make a connection with the potential donor or to strengthen an already existing connection to the nonprofit. It provides the chance to update the person about the present focus of the agency’s programs. It is a time to let the donor know that his or her support of the organization is important not only in dollar or shekel terms but also as an endorsement of the organization. A donor’s identification with an agency, reflected by a monetary contribution, can often encourage other people to donate to the organization.

We need to be careful not to allow our own discomfort with fundraising to prevent us from giving others the opportunity to participate in what we regard as a valuable and important enterprise in the Jewish community. We need to strengthen our

collective commitment to participating in the financial sustainability of our communities and the services we provide to others by asking others to join us in this effort.

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