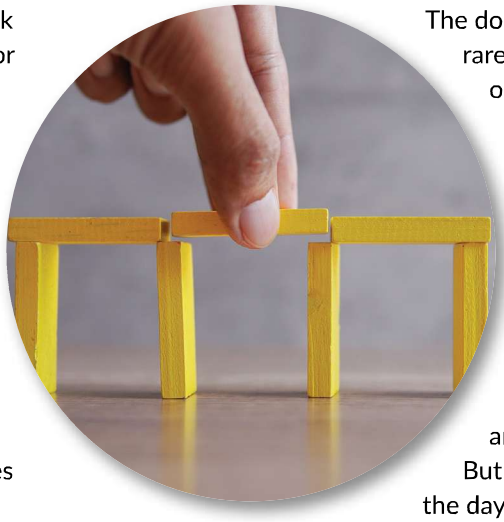
Relationship Fundraising Is a Leadership Issue

The donor experience is influenced by far more than fundraising skill.

By Karen S. Cochran, CFRE

Some nonprofits that regularly talk about their commitment to donor relationships are building barriers instead of bridges.

It's not because they don't value their donors. In most cases, these organizations regularly talk about the critical role their donors play in delivering on their mission. But when it comes to balancing the day-to-day, urgent demands of a nonprofit with the time required to strategically steward donors, it's easy for priorities to go upside down.



When this happens, everyone loses.

Nobody intends for these day-to-day "emergencies" to take priority over donors. After all, your donors are a critical resource. They are the lifeblood that drives your impact and enables you to deliver to the communities you serve. What could be more important?

But we live in a world that is full of distractions. There's always another challenge that needs attention or an opportunity that feels too important to pass up. Most times, the instinct to prioritize whatever's "urgent" makes sense at the time.

It's easy to miss the cumulative effect of this behavior—including its impact on your donors. Before you know it, a stewardship touch point gets delayed, a donor report deadline gets pushed, or a check-in visit gets postponed. Then, a donor who once felt close and well-informed only hears from your organization when you are asking for money.

I've spent much of my career helping organizations strengthen fundraising programs and leadership teams. The donor relationships that struggle are rarely the result of people who don't care or fundraisers who lack talent.

More often, the challenge isn't fundraising skill; it's whether people have the time, information, and support they need to build and nurture relationships well.

We tend to think about fundraising ethics in terms of donor intent, transparency, and accountability. Those responsibilities are fundamental to our profession. But ethical fundraising also shows up in the day-to-day reality a donor experiences—what gets prioritized and how critical decisions are shared; how we treat our donors versus how we talk about them; or even whether people listen deeply before they react or offer a solution.

Before focusing on the tactics of relationship-based fundraising, it may be worth asking a different question: Have we created the conditions that make effective, relationship-based fundraising possible?

ETHICS IS MORE THAN INDIVIDUAL CONDUCT

Ethical fundraising depends on more than good intentions. It depends on whether people have the capacity to listen carefully, follow through consistently, exercise sound judgment, and stay connected to relationships long enough for trust to develop.

Those things sound straightforward. In practice, they require time, focus, organizational alignment, and resources.

Relationship-based fundraising has become a cornerstone of major gifts because it works. Organizations that invest in long-term donor relationships often see stronger retention, greater lifetime giving, and one of the most efficient returns on fundraising investment.

There is a good reason for that.

Russell James, Ph.D., has spent much of his career studying why people give. His research suggests generosity is shaped less by a perfectly crafted appeal than by identity, trust, and the quality of the relationship surrounding the gift.

Anyone who has spent time in major gifts has seen this play out.

Donors rarely make significant investments based on a single meeting or proposal. They reach a point where they trust the organization to carry out the work, steward resources well, and keep them connected to the impact they're helping create.

Trust develops through dozens of moments that can't always be measured in a fundraising plan. Questions are answered. Commitments are honored. Communication is consistent. People take the time to understand what matters to the donor before deciding what matters most to the organization. Over time, the power of these moments accumulates. So does donor loyalty.

That's one of the reasons I see relationship-based fundraising as both a leadership practice and an ethical one. The systems we create either make those relationships easier to build or quietly undermine them.

When teams are stretched too thin and priorities constantly shift, donor follow-up can slip to the bottom of an ever-growing to-do list. Even experienced fundraisers end up reacting instead of being proactive. Stewardship becomes harder to sustain. Conversations become more transactional, and a donor's interest can fade.

WHEN EVERYTHING MATTERS, RELATIONSHIPS LOSE

One of the most common challenges I see in fundraising organizations has very little to do with fundraising strategy.

It starts with priorities. Leaders often ask teams to advance multiple important goals simultaneously—for example, grow major gifts, increase annual giving, launch a campaign, strengthen stewardship, and improve donor retention.

Each initiative makes sense on its own. The challenge arises when everything becomes equally important and trade-offs begin to occur, whether acknowledged or not. As one of my mentors once said, "When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority."

When every issue feels urgent, teams spend their time reacting. They have fewer opportunities to step back, solve problems together, or ask whether their priorities still reflect what matters most.

But teams rarely need more priorities. They usually need greater clarity about the priorities and accountability measures they already have.

One exercise I often use with leadership teams is asking them to write down their priorities. It's not unusual to see eight, nine, or 10 initiatives competing for attention at the same time.

The conversation that follows is usually more valuable than the list itself. Every goal may deserve attention, but few organizations have the capacity to pursue all of them at once. Leadership teams are often surprised by how quickly a conversation about priorities becomes a conversation about capacity.

That is why I've become increasingly disciplined about priorities. I believe that the highest-performing teams are anchored in no more than five S.M.A.R.T. (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals. As fundraisers, the first must always be about the dollars that drive your mission. That kind of focus improves your execution and protects your relationships.

While donors rarely see your competing demands behind the scenes, they do experience delayed follow-up, rushed conversations, or communication that appears only as a solicitation approaches.

TRUST BEGINS INSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

Relationships are often where organizational trade-offs become visible. What looks like a donor-relations issue is frequently an internal communication issue first.

Most of the time, nobody is intentionally withholding information. People assume someone else followed up, shared the conversation, or connected the dots. Over time, the donor's story is scattered in pieces across the organization rather than living as a single shared understanding. When communication breaks down among your team members, donors often feel it long before anyone inside the organization does.

That's why the best fundraisers understand that donor relationships can't belong to one person.

Ethical fundraising professionals don't leave those connections to chance. They create habits and systems that keep information moving, preserve institutional knowledge, and help everyone understand how the donor relationship is evolving. In high-functioning development teams, this looks like clear expectations, broad information sharing, and concerns addressed early, before they become larger issues.

You can see this most clearly in successful major gifts programs. Gift officers are not working in isolation or relying on individual instincts alone. They are using common goals, clear prospect strategies, disciplined follow-up, and timely information to coordinate their work across leadership, programs, communications, stewardship, and operations.

Donors never see the conversations that take place behind the scenes. They experience the result: a relationship that feels coordinated, thoughtful, and worthy of their trust.

LEADERS DESIGN THE ENVIRONMENT

One of the quiet responsibilities of leadership is protecting time to think. That may seem easy until you're actually leading a nonprofit.

There is always another decision waiting. A board issue surfaces. A grant deadline moves up. A staffing challenge demands attention. Most leaders spend their days moving from one important conversation to the next.

I've found that some of the most important conversations in an organization have very little to do with the next solicitation or campaign strategy. They're conversations about what the team is learning, where communication has started to break down, whether priorities still make sense, or what donor feedback requires attention.

Those conversations may not feel urgent, but they're the ones most likely to prevent future problems.

Marshall Goldsmith, a renowned executive leadership coach, distinguishes between "feedback" and "feedforward." Feedback helps teams understand what has happened. Feedforward helps improve future performance.

Feedforward makes communication improvement less personal and less punitive. Instead of "Here is what you did wrong," the team develops a shared habit of asking, "What would help us work better next time?" Over time, this discipline can create a more candid, accountable, and learning-oriented communication culture.

Some of the most effective teams have integrated feedforward into a culture that encourages quick, regular check-ins and dedicated time for planning and problem-solving.

The organizations that sustain strong donor relationships over time are not necessarily operating with fewer pressures. They've simply become more intentional about how they respond to them.

WHAT DOES A DONOR EXPERIENCE?

Most nonprofits say relationships matter. The question is whether the organization's leadership is embracing its ethical responsibility to create the best conditions for those relationships to deepen over time.

A donor's experience is rarely reflected in a single donor meeting, stewardship touch point, or well-written proposal. It is shaped by the everyday decisions that determine whether fundraisers have the time, information, and support to know donors well and build trust over time.

Before your next meeting, ask a different question: What would a donor experience if they interacted with our organization over the next six months?

Would they experience thoughtful stewardship? Consistent communication? A team that understands both their interests and your mission?

If you're not sure, don't start by rewriting the fundraising plan. Start by looking at the environment you've created for the people responsible for carrying out the existing plan. That's where ethics becomes visible.

The organization's ethics are reflected in the priorities leaders set, the conversations teams make time to have, and the systems that either strengthen relationships or slowly erode them.

Every organization says its donors matter. Ethical organizations create the conditions that allow donors to experience that commitment, one interaction at a time.



Karen S. Cochran, CFRE, is the founder and chief philanthropic innovator for Philanthropy Innovators and a board member for the AFP U.S. Foundation for Philanthropy.