Conversations of Courage

In the fundraising work that we do, whether volunteers, staff members, executives or leaders, **we embark upon conversations of courage all the time.** The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines courage as the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. I think sometimes as we venture into fundraising, there is a sense of fear and anticipation of some difficulty ahead. Aristotle put it simply. He stated that we never do anything in this world without courage. Isn't it true that we never do the work of major gift fundraising without courage? Fortunately for us, our confidence can deepen, and we can gain additional respect when we exercise courage.

A part of a fundraiser's disposition and duty is to please donors. Fundraisers work hard to provide joyful, engaging and affirming experiences for them. It's not easy to convey to a donor that we cannot provide them with what they want or what was originally committed to them. Having a solid relationship with the donor is an asset when conversations of courage need to be had.

Courage is necessary because we don't know what will happen once we begin a conversation with someone. It could be they would say no to our request, and even be rude in doing so. It could be that they would use the occasion to express something critical about our organization, that may have distressed them recently or long ago. Then, instead of asking for a gift commitment, we must listen carefully, respectfully hearing them out.

There are times when we have to say no to generous donors. They may want to contribute significant resources toward a great passion of theirs. This can be troubling if what they want to do with our organization does not align well with our mission. Such opportunities could add stress to our organization, distracting us from the core mission. It can be difficult to say no respectfully to such donors but not lose their goodwill and future support.

Sometimes we disagree with those above us in our organization: supervisors, executives, the CEO and/or board members. We are pressed to speak up in such circumstances, since not every idea for a donor engagement or some other matter for which we have responsibility, in our judgment is the best idea, or makes the best sense, given the circumstances. It falls to us to communicate our point of view with clarity and respect, always focusing upon what is best for our organization or the donor at the time. That takes courage, and trust and confidence, too.

A few years ago, when I worked at Saint Louis University, we were raising money for an arena. Some years earlier a generous donor made a commitment of $250,000 to name a suite in the future arena. As the project struggled to get traction, it went through a significant review and was "right sized." In the process of right-sizing, the suite for which the donor was to underwrite and receive naming rights, was eliminated. Instead, the equivalent hospitality suite was considerably larger. It fell to me to meet with this donor, thank him for his early leadership, explain what happened with the suite due to the arena redesign, and then ask him to enlarge his commitment from $250,000 to $500,000. I can assure you that this required courage on my part!

I prepared carefully and thoughtfully prior to that conversation. The donor said he would think about it. He didn't say yes right away, but he came around and agreed to do it because of his commitment to the project and his love and respect for Saint Louis University.

We all have occasions when we must express and exercise courage. We must do this with the utmost respect, presenting thoughtful, well-reasoned considerations and alternatives. Our focus should not be upon ourselves but upon the good of the organization and/or donors with whom we are engaged. If we act thusly, I guarantee you that we will be respected and taken seriously. **We draw upon our courage to do the difficult things, to responsibly serve our organization and its constituents.**