Seven Tips for Dealing with Difficult Donors

Thankfully, difficult donors are few and far between. Most donors are amazing people; they are generous, thoughtful and respectful. They are concerned about others. They are concerned about our organizations and about us. They are intensely motivated to improve the world and the lives of others by partnering with organizations like our own.

It's an honor to work with such people who are so highly accomplished. In their communities and places of work they are highly respected. We are the better for dealing with such people. Fortunately, this is our experience with most, but not all donors. There are difficult donors, too.

Difficult as in demanding, critical, cantankerous, curmudgeonly, mistrustful, skeptical, angry; just downright challenging. These donors are challenging for us to work with, but we must work with them. We have a responsibility to do so because of the roles that we have as fundraisers -- whether as staff or volunteers. These may be transactional donors who use their gifts to reveal their power, status and self-importance. Here are seven tips for your consideration as you prepare to engage with such a donor.

First, imagine that you will have a great meeting! Picture a meeting in which you come in smiling and you leave smiling; a conversation where there is respectful interaction. When you get up to leave, envision that you see a gleam of satisfaction in their eyes, a look of openness, of joy even. Imagine that. Attitude is everything!

Second, consider their redeeming qualities. They may demonstrate negative qualities but what are their redeeming qualities? I recall one donor who was difficult for me to deal with but in his small, rural community, he was a giant. He was a terrific benefactor, generous to his church, very generous to his alma mater and generous to our organization. Nevertheless, it was hard dealing with this individual. As I prepared to meet with him I would think about his redeeming qualities and that would help me as I would prepare to visit with the donor.

Third, anticipate the negative responses. I can think of another donor that when I would go and bring a significant gift request, what bubbled up from that donor were his reasons to not support the organization. He would bring up things that were troubling him at the time. This would require some effort on my part to help resolve these issues with him so that once he reconciled with what had concerned him, then he could proceed to make the gift. By anticipating his responses, I was able to meet with him and expect such a rejoinder. I could be confident knowing that we could arrive at a mutually satisfying conclusion even though his first instinct was to say no and tell me why not. It is vital that donors trust you and have confidence that you are really listening to them and understand where they are coming from.

Fourth, prepare by getting input from others. Talk to those around you to get their advice. They may have some familiarity with the donor and have insights to assist you. Use the advice and consultation of others to help you achieve a successful outcome.

Fifth, treat the donor with kindness and respect. Make the golden rule your golden rule -- do unto them as you would have them do unto you. Even if they don't do unto you as you wish, respond with kindness, patience, respect, appreciation.

Six, relax on the visit! If it doesn't work out, it's not the end of the world. There is still the possibility of returning in the future. Not all calls can go perfectly, and this is not just because donors are difficult. Sometimes we are not on our best game either. Let's extend some compassion to those donors with whom we struggle.

Seventh, and finally, as much as you are able, keep the focus of the call on the goal and the impact of the gift. We want that to be foremost with the donor. When dealing with a less than unhappy donor, I remind myself that I am there on behalf of the organization and it's not about me. Don't take it personally. Put on your game face and take one for the team.