Repairing Relationships

At times, fundraisers and leaders of our organizations are put in situations where we need to reach out and repair relationships with donors or other key stakeholders. A key responsibility we are entrusted with is to steward relationships on behalf of our organization and, of course, to do so with the utmost respect and success.

It is not unusual for the relationship that donors have with our organization to wax and wane. The interests of donors may change and evolve over time and their charitable giving may reflect that evolution. Sometimes they grow less interested in our organization, perhaps in part because other organizations offer a better alignment for their contemporary philanthropic priorities and passions. Beyond their philanthropic motivations, their family needs and business demands may impact how they engage philanthropically with us.

The fact is that difficulties can arise when donors take exception with our organization. We need to ask why. Our organization may have changed by intentionally shifting the mission or setting a new course and that does not interest donors or may even upset them. Less consciously our organization may be experiencing "mission drift" and we have been de-emphasizing what the donor has been most invested in. It could be that our organization has instituted a policy change and the donor does not share that point of view. Such a change could become a subject for consternation and concern for them.

Sometimes a change in our organization's leadership dissatisfies the donor and they begin to migrate away. Donors can feel embarrassed by their association with our organization because of some public accusation that comes to light. While the accusation may be unfounded, it may still upset the donor.

Our job is to represent our organization to others, whether staff or volunteers. It is our responsibility to explain the organization's point of view to someone who is upset or concerned with the organization. We should listen carefully, thoughtfully, take notes, and acknowledge the donor's point of view. We should confirm that we understand the donor correctly. Then we must take what steps we can to represent the donor's concern or complaint to our organization in pursuit of a mutually acceptable solution.

Unfortunately, we cannot always reach a satisfactory resolution. Such tensions, as unfortunate as they are, do happen. It is essential that we are responsive, communicate well and strive to restore the relationship to its former condition. Sometimes using intermediaries can be helpful for our organization, someone who is supportive of our organization, understands our organization's point of view, and perhaps has a personal relationship with the upset donor. That intermediary can interact with that donor to help bring about some resolution between the donor and our organization.

We need to maintain a long view. We cannot always bring successful reconciliation about immediately, sometimes it takes more time. It is not unusual, that after some time has passed, that donor opens themselves to re-engage with our organization.