Stewards of Relationships

A steward is responsible for the care of something, to take care of someone. **As fundraisers we have a charge to steward relationships for our organizations.** Sometimes we were the first to establish a relationship with a donor and thereafter accountable to guide the relationship in an ongoing way. It is worth bearing in mind that often there were stewards who preceded us that were responsible for the caring of these relationships, and then they became our responsibility during our tenure. Hopefully, we add to the relationships for our organization through our hard work, sincere efforts and good fortune. One day we will hand these relationships on to our successors.

While we care for these relationships, **we must do so wisely and gently so that the bonds between these relationships and our organization strengthen, deepen, grow, and expand** during the time for which we have this duty. We should possess a certain humility about our role since, if it wasn't for those who preceded us, we wouldn't be enjoying these relationships today. It is our responsibility to care for them well and then to hand them off to others to take them further still.

When I served as Vice Chancellor for University Advancement at the University of Missouri-St. Louis there was an extraordinary couple, Des and Mary Ann Lee, who were very active donors to the university. To this day they are the largest individual donors to the university. They established the Des Lee Collaborative Vision. The Des Lee Collaborative Vision includes 36 endowed professorships that partner with over 100 community organizations primarily in the St. Louis region although many of the professors are engaged worldwide. While the professors are very focused on developing research, their research and engagement work are community based. To my knowledge there is nothing comparable in the country. Des and Mary Ann Lee established 31 of these endowed professorships at UMSL, underwriting 20 of them personally and then recruiting other local benefactors to join with them to further extend the model and mission. Sadly, Des and Mary Ann are both deceased.

Upon my arrival in August 2008, I became responsible to steward Des and Mary Ann and discovered was that they were being stewarded well by university representatives. They were quite engaged with the Collaborative. Des would meet with the professors individually and as a group regularly because he was keenly interested in their work. He would frequent the activities that were going on in the community through these many partnerships. He would review the gift agreements to confirm that the activities of the professors reflected their original intent. From my vantage point, university representatives worked hard to faithfully fulfill the agreements, and continue to do so. Of course, it is only right that this be done to meet its obligations to the donors and to honor this terrific legacy that Des and Mary Ann entrusted to the university.

Here are two considerations. **First, how does the donor want to be stewarded?** Do they want to be actively involved as Des was? Do they want to involve their spouse, their children? Perhaps there are key associates around their foundation or their company that they want to have involved. We are to ensure that their wishes are respected and engage those people. Donors may be content to have periodic contact through written communications, phone calls, annual reports, and so on. They may want to have regular interactions with those who are beneficiaries of their contributions.

Second, who should be involved in the stewarding of the relationship? As fundraisers should we be in the background in a supportive role or serve as the point person for the relationship? Regardless, the more integrated that donors can become with the mission of the organization and its many representatives, the better.

Stewarding relationships is an honor for those engaged in this activity. It is an honor to help donors make a difference in the world. But, not only are they transformed by theirs acts of generosity toward our organization, but we can be transformed ourselves as we engage with such generous and remarkable people and facilitate their philanthropy.