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**5 Things Nonprofits Can Control During Hyper Change**

By Valeria Lassiter

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Every nonprofit has a culture of philanthropy. It’s a set of organizational values and practices that supports and nurtures development, while building cohesion and teamwork. Each person must understand how he or she contributes to this culture.

Hyper change truly tests and reveals the state of an organization’s culture of philanthropy. For example, it can reveal the agility of your development functions, their ability to support successful fundraising ideation and execution, or whether you invested enough resources in development to meet current demands.

There are **5 Things Nonprofits Can Control** within a culture of philanthropy to drive success during hyper change:

1. **Know the external landscape—as well as your organization’s internal trends.**

The external landscape is important for nonprofit staff and board leadership to understand and provides context for the organization’s plans to maintain or cease opportunity during crisis. For example, according to the Philanthropy Outlook report[[1]](#footnote-1) released February 2020, estimates for 2020 and 2021 reflect a return to broad growth in charitable giving following the lull caused by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) and other factors. The report predicts increased contributions from all sources of giving, with the largest increase coming from giving by bequest. These predictions may very well be impacted by the current crisis. At the same time, foundation giving for 2020 could see an increase from last year because of the emergency and special funds being established to address the current crisis.

However, external data should not replace internal analysis of your organization’s nuanced patterns. To inform decision making and set direction during crisis, you can determine the vulnerability of revenue sources for your organization—specifically—by answering the following questions:

* What are the trends for your sources of revenue in general?
* What has your organization’s giving landscape looked like amid previous crises (for example, 9/11, Swine Flu, Hurricane Katrina)?
* How have donors responded to your organization during those times?
* What communication strategies have been most effective in general and during crises?

1. **Communicate what you mean—and where.**

Like me, you have received a barrage of emails as organizations communicate their responses to the novel coronavirus situation. And while communication is important, making it count calls for reaching your specific audience with your specific message. Here are three questions to ask when communicating to your donors during times of crisis:

* + *What message does the audience want to hear?* The current pandemic is affecting everyone and everything including individuals, organizations and societal structures. It’s important to put yourself in your audience’s shoes and consider how their priorities, limitations and concerns might have shifted. Your communications should reflect this insight. Reach them where they are.
  + *Which message must we deliver?* Supply facts first, then positivity to deal with them. Be honest and be clear about what you’re asking but also help donors understand why you’re asking. If you want donors to do something during difficult times, they have to know why it’s important now and what the results will be. But don’t forget to make donors feel. Appeal to their values and remind them why they supported you in the past.
  + *Who is the best messenger to deliver it?* The most trusted person is the one who should deliver your message. If that’s a donor or volunteer, he or she should model the behavior your call to action invites.

1. **Know your donor’s motivation.**

Do they want an appeal or a deal?Both giving motivations are important, but in times of crisis, the mission-driven donor shows up. They give because they are invested in your mission, not just a deal or an exchange. They are consistent, regular givers. The amount of the contribution doesn’t matter.

1. **Move donors online.**

Social distancing may give donors newfound openness to giving online. Remind them of the opportunity and make it easy to give online. Not only is this an opportunity to meet your organizational needs, but it’s also a chance to connect. This week, a banker shared with me how her team is stepping up its service for senior customers to provide better training on how to bank online. Could your nonprofit offer a webinar or telephone tutorial for donors who want to learn about how to support your organization online?

1. **Remember the relationship.**

The best philanthropic relationships are reciprocal—donors concerned with the nonprofit meeting its mission during a crisis, the nonprofit concerned about the well-being of its donors. This week, my board and client meetings start with a check-in on how everyone is doing. Organizations should do the same with their donors. Development colleague Michael Ward said it best in a recent LinkedIn article:

“This is the most appropriate time to reinvest in the relationship. Reset, focus on strengthening our communication and engagement and approaching our work with great

empathy and authenticity. Will there be donors that will want to continue current gift discussions? Sure, but is this the time to be sending outbound emails or calls to prospects we have not yet met? I have my doubts.…We must remember that while we all live in our bubbles and believe the world revolves around the mission we serve, there are millions of bubbles outside of ours dealing with sickness, unemployment, real life disruption, living displacements and so forth.

“If you want to strengthen your organization, reach out just to stay in touch; make sure your donors know you are there for them. Keep in mind that like those challenging times in the years past, you, your team and your mission will be in a position of strength to emerge much stronger, and more meaningful to your donor base that will create greater philanthropic impact in the long run.”

Take a deep breath, accept the disruption and find the hidden blessings within it. If you can do this, I’m confident that your organization will be positioned for greater opportunities, not just in the future, but right here, in the now.

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1. The Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)