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Philanthropy: The Synergy of Emotion + Logic



People, foundations, and corporations give away billions of dollars each year to nonprofits in the US and abroad. If you're going to be in the fundraising business, it's important to understand what motivates all that giving.

On my journey, I've found two indisputable facts that exist about the act of philanthropy:

1. Only people have the power to give away money. Whether those people are acting on their own or on behalf of a foundation or business entity, ultimately a human being or a group of human beings makes every philanthropic decision.
2. The motivation to give money to a worthy cause (that is, to make an investment) follows a two-stage, sequential process: *from emotion to logic*.

Reflect on the times you've contributed to a charity and what led you to do it. Of all the millions of worthy causes related to everything from alleviating child poverty to preserving the Alaskan wilderness, what motivated *you* to give to your specific charities?

Emotion + Logic = Magic

Here's an example of how the philanthropic process works.

Judy's best friend Laura contracts, struggles with, and eventually succumbs to breast cancer. In the aftermath of that horrible ordeal, Judy decides to contribute money to causes related to breast cancer. Maybe it's to find a cure, or help women coping with the disease, or help those like herself who are recovering from the loss of a loved one.

Judy's philanthropic journey is informed by the range of emotions she has experienced related to losing her friend. Her response to those emotions is the logical impulse to DO SOMETHING. Contributing money to breast cancer-related causes satisfies that need: To make sure Laura's passing will not be the final act in the narrative.

In fact, research shows that the act of giving money to a charity connected with a trauma, whether losing a loved one or, conversely, supporting an organization that has helped save a loved one's life, is a meaningful part of the healing process.

Might Judy's path of wanting to do something shift when she learns that heart disease actually kills more women than breast cancer? One could easily make the logical argument that it would. That, if saving women's lives is Judy's ultimate goal, it would make more sense for her to give money to fight heart disease. And that Judy will respond, based on this logical argument, by switching her giving pattern...right?

Not likely. Because the emotion behind the act that led to the logical outcome of Judy's philanthropy came specifically from her proximity to breast cancer. And as long as women are contracting,

suffering, and dying from this disease, Judy's response is unlikely to transfer to a disease with which she's had no emotional connection—even if a more "logical" argument can be made that curing heart disease saves more women's lives than curing breast cancer.

I have never in my career persuaded anyone to make a charitable donation of any significance using logic alone.

This statement and underlying knowledge is foundational to anyone entering the fundraising profession. No matter how great and noble the cause—and, let's face it, the world is replete with noble causes—if your donor hasn't developed an emotional connection to it, one that socks them in the gut, they won't move to logical response that leads them to give a meaningful gift.

Don't just take my word for it. Ask donors how they go about choosing which causes to support. Read the annual, year-end *Chronicle of Philanthropy* articles that profile the largest gifts given the previous year. In every single case, donors link their giving to their life story, whether it's the role their alma mater played in their journey from rags to riches, a family member's struggles with (fill in the blank) disease, their experience growing up in a racist or homophobic culture, or their personal/spiritual connection to the natural world. Not once have I ever read a story where a donor made a substantial gift to a cause that had no emotionally poignant connection to their life story.

Emotion + Logic = Investment

In essence, here are the Three Steps To Raise Money for Charitable causes:

1. Uncover the well of emotion the person you're asking for money holds deep inside.
2. Determine if your nonprofit has a service or program that aligns with that emotion.

3. Work to make a logical, monetary connection between your donor's emotion and the work your nonprofit is doing for your community.

A cautionary note: In your desire to make a match, don't ever over-promise or move your nonprofit off-mission just to land a significant gift. Nine times out of ten, this strategy will wind up costing you more money than the gift is worth.

The temptation to over-promise or go off-mission shows up in many sectors, but I've found higher education to be particularly susceptible. In this situation, an alumnus/ae with high capacity wants to fund a new program that they feel, based on their personal life or work experience, is of ultimate importance to every student's education.

The reason this winds up in failure is because a single gift rarely covers every cost of an entire program, and most donors expect and assume the school will find other donors to join in on the cause.

So, while the school might get the gift, now you're left with having to deliver on a promise that often requires additional resources to fully implement. The unfortunate outcome in this case, one I've seen happen time and time again, is that neither donor nor organization is satisfied in the long term.

We'll focus more on this topic in Chapter 13, "Donor-vs. Community-Centered Philanthropy."