

IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME: CREATING A CULTURE OF FUNDRAISING

Written by [jennifer](#) on July 27, 2017

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Does creating a culture of fundraising seem like an insurmountable task at your organization? Beth Rayfield shows us how we can overcome challenges and get on the path towards greater financial sustainability.

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Members of CHIRLA and other immigrant rights coalitions gather at the break of dawn on Wilshire Boulevard and Alvarado Street to demand dignity and respect as part of the Caravana Contra el Miedo. | Luis Tadeo, CHIRLA

AS A FORMER UNION ORGANIZER, I believe in the saying that every worker is an organizer. As a development professional, I also know that every organizer is a fundraiser. And while the former is vital for economic justice in this country, I believe the latter is equally crucial to our ability to continue to fund organizing at our social justice nonprofits. If you're reading this Journal, you know that fundraising at grassroots social justice organizations is a tough gig. It requires long hours, resourcefulness on a tight budget, and stretched capacity from a small team. If you're lucky, you have a great partnership with your executive director and the dedication of a pro-fundraising board. If you're not so lucky, your leadership finds it hard to prioritize fundraising and you struggle with weak back-end systems and inadequate or nonexistent donor management systems. There are real challenges to our work and this is creating a crisis in the nonprofit sector. The average length that a development professional stays in any one position is three years, and the average length that folks stay in the sector at all is seven years. The highly-cited national study, [UnderDeveloped](#)(2013), by CompassPoint and the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund documented the lack of retention of high-performing fundraising staff and its costly impact.

At the same time, our revenue generation models are weakened by a lack of diversity in both our donor bases and our profession. Overreliance on foundation funding affects our long-term sustainability while the lack of people of color in the development profession means that predominantly white people own the money in our movements. Fundraising needs diversification in order to be a field in which talented, mission-driven organizers and people of color see their professional futures. Only this kind of shift will make our outreach to donors more relevant, sustainable and successful.

YOU ALREADY HAVE DOZENS OF PEOPLE WHO ARE DEDICATED TO YOUR MISSION, KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT YOUR ISSUES, AND COMMITTED TO YOUR ORGANIZATION'S SUSTAINABILITY.

So the struggle is real but you still have a budget to raise, right? One way to increase the fundraising capacity at your organization is to build a culture of fundraising: a model of beliefs, behaviors and systems through which every member of your staff, board and leadership participate in fundraising in every budget year. In this way, you will increase your capacity to reach a base of donors and stakeholders and build organizational sustainability. At the same time, you will teach organizers and other organizational staff to feel ownership for the financial health of your nonprofit. Last, you will encourage all staff to consider fundraising an organizational priority, a core competency of their job, and a possible professional pathway for their future.

During my eight years as the development director at the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), we worked hard to build just such a model. It was not

always easy but I was fortunate to have the amazing leadership of Executive Director Angelica Salas, Associate Director Zerihoun Yilma and then-Board Chair Mary Ochs, who believed in this path and helped make it a priority. This work would not have been possible without the talent and creativity of CHIRLA development staff Silvia Fuentes and Tanya Gonzalez, and is continued by the incredible contributions of Monica Gomez, Julio Martinez and Ana Reyes. I was also lucky to be surrounded by a management team and staff with many talented fundraisers that just needed training and systems to be successful.

This is where the title of this article comes in—"If you build it, they will come." You already have dozens of people who are dedicated to your mission, knowledgeable about your issues, and committed to your organization's sustainability. A culture of fundraising simply establishes the shared expectations and systems needed to put these talents to work for fundraising. Your staff and board are having thousands of conversations about your organization every year. If you could add a fundraising ask to even a fraction of those, you could increase your revenue, donors and reach exponentially without increasing your fundraising costs.

Why don't our organizations follow this practice already? Many of them do—some of you are probably thinking yes, we have an annual drive that everyone participates in or we have 100 percent participation from our board and top leadership. Great! Maybe you will find ideas here that will help you grow. Others are thinking, this would never work at our organization—our leadership would not support this, our board is not a fundraising board, our staff work so hard I could never ask them to take on a responsibility like this. These are real challenges but in movement work leadership is everything, and by this I mean YOUR leadership. Culture change doesn't happen overnight, it requires persistence, follow-up and follow through. Too often in development work, we see ourselves as support staff and believe our highest purpose is to serve the organization and the community. Guess what else is an act of service? Leadership.

Leading your organization to a new model or way of being is uncomfortable and it will be met with resistance, obstacles and relapses. Unfortunately, as development staff we know better than most that organizing dollars from foundations are on the decline and that the work we do is not possible without organizing. For this reason, we MUST increase our sustainability through individual donor development, we must acquire and retain more donors, and not merely through social media although this is important. Building a culture of fundraising is one practice that can help increase your donor base and your impact, and YOUR leadership is the one that is required to make this happen.

Conceptual Framework

One useful way to think about building a culture of fundraising or any organizational change is the Wheel of Change model, developed by Robert Gass, founder of the [Social Transformation Project](#) and co-founder of [Rockwood Leadership Institute](#). The Wheel of Change proposes that successful organizational change happens in three places: Hearts and Minds—our thoughts and feelings; Behavior—our choices and norms; and Structures—the external processes and practices that organize our activity. To build a culture of fundraising, all three of these components are important. In addition, they are iterative and will require repetition and renewal over time.

Hearts and Minds

This is an important starting point. We have deeply ingrained and cultural understandings of the propriety of asking for money, and these norms vary widely by race, ethnicity, class and gender expression. In order to ask others to fundraise, you have to know why YOU do. Of all the ways you could contribute to the movement or issues you are passionate about, why do you fundraise? Also important, how did you get to a place of comfort asking for money?

There are many fundraising staff who do not actually like asking for money, let alone organizing other staff to do so. To work with staff on this issue, I encourage leaders to consider a fundraising story of self exercise, based on the Story of Self exercise by Marshall Ganz. Asking people to talk in small groups about their earliest memories of asking for and being asked for donations can help surface issues of discomfort many of us have around money. It is important for fundraisers to understand that they are asking for funding for something bigger than themselves, such as your mission.

YOUR BASE MEMBERS MAY CHOOSE TO SAY NO TO DONATING, BUT THAT DOES NOT MEAN WE SHOULD NOT ASK.

I also find it helpful to remind fundraisers that because we are hardwired for altruism, acts of giving fire the pleasure centers of our brain. Asking someone to give is a gift to them; it is an opportunity to share their abundance and live their values more authentically. Another concern staff organizers have is about asking low-income people to donate. This is usually a concern of staff, not members and leaders who are low-income people themselves. Low-income people make decisions every day about how to use their resources, and it is our work to increase their agency not diminish it. Your base members may choose to say no to donating, but that does not mean we should not ask. Last, consider developing a shared fundraising vision for staff and board for clarity on how a culture of fundraising fits into your organizational mission, vision and values, and theory of change. This provides an organizational philosophy that helps anchor staff/board fundraising and serves as a rationale to guide the work as it grows.

Structures

Structures are the next method by which a culture of fundraising becomes normalized and expected as an expression of the mission and values of the organization and core expectation of each staff/board member's scope of work. This can be done in many ways that will be authentic to your organizational culture. Some suggestions are:

- **Support from leadership, executive director and board—ideally messaging comes from the top and is underscored by statements from leadership.** Start engaging your executive director on the issue of building a fundraising culture and how it could benefit the organization. Bear in mind, however, that sometimes you need to start doing the work and engage your leaders as you go. The first all-staff membership drive we did at CHIRLA actually happened while our executive director was on sabbatical but the management team provided the leadership needed to take this first step.
- **Our staff people are busier than ever in this new era.** Make sure their fundraising duties come at a predictable time so they can plan ahead. Annual fundraising vehicles such as a fall membership drive or a spring gala make it possible for them to know when

“fundraising season” will come and allows them to manage their own duties as well as the folks they manage.

■ **Remember that your organizers are campaigners and they understand campaign structure.** An annual drive that is linked to campaign priorities and is time delimited with clear goals and tracking is a familiar model. It should start with a launch event and end with a clear celebration and debrief of the goal met. Supporting the campaign structure with annual trainings, fundraising materials and coaching is important. A team-based fundraising competition can also be successful, featuring prizes and bragging rights for categories like most money raised, most new donors, and first to reach goal.

■ **Fundraising responsibilities should be an explicit expectation of staff and board with fundraising participation communicated regularly through job interviews, staff meetings, retreats, evaluations, etc.** If fundraising does not get time on your all-staff agendas and is not integrated into planning conversations, you are signaling that it is not an organizational priority for all staff.

■ **Exercise your project management skills.** Design an oversight model that allows you and a team to follow-up with individual fundraisers to help them troubleshoot, offer coaching, celebrate successes, and hold them accountable.

Working With Boards

In fundraising, your board can be your greatest resource or your greatest challenge. Many boards already have a consciousness around a culture of fundraising or philanthropy, operating under a give or get policy or a 100 percent donation policy. But when I give workshops on this topic, I often have folks that say “Our board doesn’t fundraise.” OK, your board doesn’t fundraise...NOW. But you can start with what you’ve got. When I joined CHIRLA in 2008, the stated position of our board chair at the time was that ours was not a fundraising board. However, there were members of the board who did want to fundraise so I focused on them, engaging them in our fundraising efforts and providing support for them to talk to their own networks. Over time this work became more robust, and when new leadership joined the board the vision for the board’s fundraising role changed, and we had a great foundation on which to build. The lesson here is to meet your board where they are and put your energy where there is the best return on investment. I guarantee you there is at least ONE person on your board that is interested in fundraising. Cultivate them. Support them in throwing a house party or soliciting their company or doing relationship building for the organization with their connections. Start small and make sure any success is communicated to the rest of the board and celebrated. This progress will show others what is possible and help spark their own fundraising ideas. With persistence, your board fundraising will grow and you will attract new board prospects that are interested in fundraising and see this as a normal part of your board’s culture. There’s a saying, “Rome wasn’t built in a day—but parts of it were.” Build a part—the rest of your city will come with time.

Once you’ve established your board’s culture of fundraising, you can grow it using the Wheel of Change as a guide.

■ Engage in hearts and minds exercises with your board including a fundraising vision statement and a fundraising story of self exercise. These exercises can be done with board and staff together which is a great way for each group to be inspired by the other.

■ Try to do a one-on-one with each board member annually to work through their individual fundraising plan—their personal pledge for the year, how they will plug into your existing vehicles and other committee work or relationship building they might want to do.

■ Establish cultural norms around board fundraising such as an annual fundraising goal of one to two percent of your budget with a goal to grow this number over time.

■ Establish a board fundraising committee that works peer-to-peer with the rest of the board to support fundraising, make asks, and encourage accountability.

- Lift up successes as they happen and report outcomes annually. Don't only include fundraising outcomes but new relationships, cultivation events, and board support for foundation, corporate or other solicitations.
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SUCCESS IN THIS WORK IS NOT ABOUT CHARM OR PERSONALITY—IT IS ABOUT DEEP LISTENING, AUTHENTICITY AND PERSISTENCE.

One of the most important things you can do to support board and staff is regular fundraising trainings. It is good to develop your own training based on your organization's mission, vision and values. Additionally, you can offer a training geared towards new staff once a year so they can spend extra time on the basics. Occasionally bring in a colleague or consultant as guest trainer to offer a new perspective. The components I like to include in my trainings are:

- An icebreaker or fundraising story of self exercise;
- A review of the shared organizational fundraising vision and how staff fundraising drives our mission;
- Fundraising campaign details, tactical options (will be different for an event versus a membership drive for example), timeline, and logistics; and,
- Role-play—this is very important. Fundraising is experiential not theoretical. People must practice making the ask. I like to role play one example in front of the group followed by a game where participants get "money" in the form of candy. They practice making "the ask" with a partner who will make a donation of one, two or three pieces of candy based on the success of the ask. Partners exchange feedback and we return to the big group for debrief.

The meat of the training should be the basics of fundraising, a drill down into the steps and workflow of outreach and follow-up.

I do my training using an acronym I developed called CRAFT (Contacts, Rap, the Ask, Follow-up and Thank you) and I train staff on the specifics of each component. I like the word CRAFT because some people feel that fundraisers are born, not made—that you either have that personality or you don't. My experience is that fundraising is a skill set and that the shyest, most introverted people can learn those skills and become great fundraisers. You may be surprised by who on your staff become real standouts at fundraising. Success in this work is not about charm or personality—it is about deep listening, authenticity and persistence.

The CRAFT Model

■ **Contacts:** Fundraising is a numbers game. It doesn't matter if you have to raise \$1 billion, if you ask enough people, you will make goal. Help staff brainstorm a list of prospects two to three times the number needed to make their goal and divide into hot, warm and cold prospects. Start with a few hot prospects to polish your rap and confidence and work your way down the list. Divide your number of prospects across the weeks of the drive and front load to ensure that all your money is in the door by the end of the drive.

■ **Rap:** What is the context of your fundraising ask? It should be timely, impactful and relevant to your donor and their interests. Use a few statistics to show you know your stuff but not too many, and relate it to your own story and experience. Encourage fundraisers to become donors themselves before they make an ask so they can share with donors why they themselves give.

■ **The Ask:** Should be specific, direct and to the point. The ask is best followed by the "therapeutic silence," in which the fundraiser is silent and allows the donor time to respond without getting nervous and jumping in to persuade or bargain. Make your ask and close your mouth.

■ **Follow-up:** People are busy—they may have the best intentions of fulfilling their pledge but can't quite get to it. Help your fundraisers think about the best ways to follow-up to get the gift in the door. There may be ways your development team can support them in this, but remember a donor will feel most accountable to the person who got their pledge. If you get a maybe, make a plan to follow-up and stick to it. If you get a no, ask to add the prospect to the mailing list and reach out during the next drive. Remember good fundraisers are not the ones that hear the most yeses; they are the ones that can hear a lot of nos and still keep asking. The best fundraisers use deep listening to turn those nos into yeses.

■ **Thank you:** Say it often and in as many ways as possible. Your organization's thank you is not sufficient.

Overcoming Challenges

One of the biggest challenges to building a culture of fundraising is that fundraising can be devalued at our social justice organizations. At some of our organizations you will hear people say, "Oh, I hate fundraising." Why is this OK? Your colleagues would feel diminished if you said, "I hate organizing," or "I hate educating our members." Fundraising is perceived to be separate from movement building—not transformational like organizing, not strategic like policy advocacy and campaign work, not a benefit to the community like direct service. It is seen as a necessary evil, a soft skill, a symptom of what is wrong with capitalism and the nonprofit industrial complex. In reality, fundraising IS movement building. It is one of the many ways that we educate, agitate and organize. Our donors are activists, advocates and stakeholders. They march with us, pray at our vigils, carry signs at our protests and yes, they invest in us. Our donors are us and each member of our organizations must engage them in this vital work of social change by seeking their time, talent AND treasure.

These things were the hardest for me:

■ **Keep a sense of humor.** Fundraising can seem like life or death when your colleagues' jobs are on the line but if you can't find joy in your work it's difficult to inspire yourself or others.

■ **It's not personal.** Your fundraising team needs to feel accountable to your shared goal and each other, not to you. They are not fundraising for you, but for the organization, the mission and the community.

■ **Keep it fresh.** Try to come up with something new every year—a new theme, a new competition, a new event element—something that feels different and fresh.

■ **Anything is better than nothing.** You don't have to be perfect, just get started. Your confidence and competence will grow with time.

■ **Celebrate success.** Be sure to send all-staff emails when folks reach goal, give shout outs in staff meeting and prizes

for competition winners. At CHIRLA we would post a different fundraising thermometer in the hallway (one year based on Mario Brothers) where we would track our shared progress.

Building an organizational culture of fundraising is not easy. It does not happen overnight and it does require substantial oversight and project management. It may not be right for your organization right now. Nevertheless, building the capacity of your board and staff to fundraise can be a great way to increase your financial sustainability and flexibility, and can be part of the stakeholder engagement work that is likely already happening. It is also a way to engage the young leaders of color in our organizations in building a skill set that will be vital to them as they pursue their paths as elected leaders, executive directors and, hopefully, development directors. Building a culture of fundraising will not only increase access to dollars for organizing, it will also cultivate people of color to become owners of the money in our movements, making fundraising core to the realization of our vision for inclusion and justice.

Remember all that the next time someone tells you “I hate fundraising.”

Beth Rayfield is the director of institutional advancement at the [Center for Community Change](#) (CCC) and former development director at [CHIRLA](#). This article is based on Beth’s workshop by the same title at the 2016 [Money for Our Movements conference](#) in Denver, CO.