

PROUD TO BE A FUNDRAISER

“You shouldn’t call yourself a fundraiser,” she said.

I was gobsmacked. She almost snarled when she said the word, “fundraiser.” “You know, the people who work at hospitals and universities, they’re fundraisers.” She knew that I work primarily with emerging and medium sized social justice and social service groups in my fundraising practice. “You’re different. You link donors to important community work.”

Well, I thought, that’s what all fundraisers do if they do their job well. They link donors to important work. And while I may not support or agree with all of the causes that Canada’s 86,000 charities are engaged in, I do believe that philanthropy plays an important role in people’s lives and in society. It can engage donors in something bigger than themselves. It allows people and institutions to collectively participate in addressing problems they could not otherwise resolve alone.

To me, that’s noble work.

I work primarily with smaller and medium-sized organizations and often in the world of social change. I fervently believe that smaller groups are well positioned to introduce mind-blowing innovation. However, in a fragmented sector with large, diverse and intractable problems, you sometimes need big machinery to move a mountain-sized problem. So, both large and small institutions are needed to address the myriad issues in our society - and each plays a critical role.

Even after two decades of working as a dedicated fundraising professional, I continue to be shocked when I learn that people see fundraisers as somehow disreputable or unworthy of their respect. When I speak with fundraising colleagues, we all appear to be so genuine...heck, even earnest. After recently listening to a panel of seasoned fundraising professionals answer the question, “Why are you a fundraiser?” at a mentoring event, they all repeated a common refrain: **we get to help make a difference.**

So why are we perceived with such disdain if we mean so well? Here’s what I think:

1. People don’t really understand what we do

My mom never understood what I did for a living. Colleagues who worked in the same organization as me never really understood what the fundraising team did. As a consultant, I spend a lot of time working with people in organizations to help them understand what is involved in fundraising and how they can be part of the fun.

So, why would we expect people who don’t work in the sector to understand what we do if our colleagues and families don’t get it? It’s not an earth shattering insight to anyone who works in the sector. However, it is part of the equation that explains why there is such disdain for the profession.

2. The occasional sensational story of excess or scandal + Bad is Stronger than Good

Like any profession, there are charlatans as well as folks who strive to work with integrity. Sadly, the occasional shenanigans of rogues make for sensational media stories. And according to research (check out my footnote), bad stories make more of an impression on us than good stories. So, the bad stories stick in our minds more than stories about generous donors or fundraisers toiling away, behind the scenes.....Hey, wait a minute! Are there *ever* stories about fundraisers toiling away behind the scenes??? Nope. It's part of the deal: a fundraiser's role is to check your ego, support your volunteers to help raise money and recognize donors for their contribution to making a difference.

3. Fundraising, money and our unexamined values

People think fundraising is about money when it's really *about relationships*. Take a profession that is believed to be about money; add to it the variable that many people have an emotionally fraught relationship with money - regardless of whether they have lots or very little of it and it results in fundraising bumping up against what are oftentimes unconscious beliefs and values related to money. Most of us don't spend a lot of time thinking about *our relationship* to and with money. We may - or may not - think about money and work with money, but not often do we consider where our beliefs and values about money came from and how they impact our relationship with it.

It's not easy to examine our beliefs and values about money. When I have done this exercise with board members, it has proven to be an incredibly emotional experience. But it seems to me that it is especially important for those of us who face the consequences of poverty in our work life. When you see poverty and income inequality and all of the associated challenges, it can be easy to believe the world is one of scarcity.

As a fundraiser – whether you have that in your title or whether you're an Executive Director or volunteer who is responsible for fundraising - it's really helpful to believe that the world is one of sufficiency. I'm not so optimistic that I believe the world is full of abundance, which is a term I used to hear a lot. I believe in sufficiency - that there is enough for everyone - as opposed to abundance, which to me conjures up images of luxury cars and mansions. Some might say this view is limiting, but I think it's more pragmatic than "abundance." And it resonates more for me than "abundance." That may be a reflection of my own journey with money. I'll keep you posted about whether that ever changes for me.

¹Baumeister, Roy F., Ellen Bratslavsky, Catrin Finkenauer, and Kathleen D. Vohs. "Bad Is Stronger Than Good." *Review of General Psychology* 5.4 (2001): 323-70. Print.

4. Asking for help makes us feel vulnerable

Asking for help makes us feel vulnerable. And that's scary. It's human nature to avoid feeling scared or vulnerable.

I think that asking for money feels like asking for help, to some people. So maybe the person who accused me of being a "fundraiser" was projecting her discomfort with the notion of asking for money and the feelings of vulnerability that evokes.

But here's how I look at it: You're asking people to help participate in something bigger than themselves. You're asking people to participate in helping to address problems that they could not otherwise resolve alone. You're inviting people to be part of a solution and to be part of a community.

THE FORMULA

So, here is the formula I have devised to help explain the contempt our profession sometimes elicits:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Lack of understanding of fundraising} + \\ & \text{occasional rogue behaviour/bad is stickier than good} + \\ & \text{emotionally fraught topic} + \\ & \text{feeling vulnerable} = \\ & \text{fundraisers are held in disdain} \end{aligned}$$

Formulas are supposed to provide a mathematical solution for real world problems (thanks Wikipedia). This doesn't feel like a solution so much as an explanation. I suppose that's a start. Can we influence any of the variables to change the equation? I'm proud to be working in the charitable sector as a fundraiser and helping make a difference in the world. This is my attempt at the beginning of a conversation. Let's chat.