

Seizing the Moment: Frank Advice for Community Organizers Who Want to Raise More Money

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Now is an important moment in the history of community organizing, when need and opportunity coincide. One hundred years after the birth of Saul Alinsky, more people than ever are participating in or aware of this extraordinary work that engages hundreds of thousands of people across our nation in public life. This is thanks in part to having a presidential candidate, now president of the United States, who is a former community organizer.

At the same time, the constant denigration of the profession by prominent Republicans during the 2008 campaign and more recent attacks on community organizing groups, some generating hundreds of news stories, have helped ensure that almost every American has at least heard of community organizing.

Can we translate this growing public awareness into serious funding that will propel growth and strengthen the field? That is one of the most important questions facing organizers today. We believe that in spite of the current economic climate, there is real potential for tremendous expansion of funding for community organizing. But this potential will be realized only if organizers do their part.

In the following pages, we'll offer up some tips and strategic advice that will help organizers dramatically increase their funding from institutional grantmakers and major individual donors. We can't raise the money for you – but the time is ripe for organizers who are serious about increasing their financial resources to build a plan and start systematically leveraging more support for this work that is so vital to our future and our democracy.

Building Relationships

From our decades of experience thinking about how to get more donors and funders to support

organizing, one lesson stands out loud and clear: successful fundraising for community organizing requires building strong relationships with a wide variety of potential donors and funders. Many organizers fail to raise money because they haven't built good relationships, or because they haven't cast their nets wide enough.

Finding the right prospects isn't rocket science, but it does take some time and a systematic approach. For foundations, your best prospects are those funders who have invested in your organization in the past, or who currently are funding groups similar to yours. You want to start with a large list of potential funders, and then look for those where the fit is best. Some won't be able to fund you because of geographic restrictions, or because the issues you're working on don't fit with their priorities. But others will be a good match.

Organizers often find it somewhat easy to generate a list of potential foundation funders but are *convinced* they don't know any major donors. Thinking you don't know any prospective major donors is the first hurdle you need to get over. In reality, the contacts you need are all around you. As fundraising guru Kim Klein says in the title of one of her articles, "You Already Know All the People You Need to Know to Raise All the Money You Need to Raise."

Remember that prospective major donors are people you or someone in your group knows or has access to who have an interest in you, your work, issue area or community, and the ability to give a significant contribution.

Where are these people? Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Identify major donors whose intentions and goals match yours from inside your organization and work your way out.** Who demonstrates an appreciation for

your work by coming to your events or asking for information about your work? Which prospects show potential interest through what they do for a living or where they volunteer? Whose giving patterns in other areas suggest they are givers and have money to give? Who knows, loves and supports you and would be open to extending that relationship to supporting your organization?

- **Get your board, members and staff to give and connect you to family members and friends who are possible donors.**
- **Make a list of members and staff who have moved or no longer are active.**
- **Make a list of the not-the-usual-suspects.** Include those with whom you and your organization do business. You can approach the business and the business owner. This includes the pizza parlor next door and your accountant. Ask local politicians (successful and defeated) for their support and names of people you can approach. Ask your funders and other allies like clergy whose members are in your organization for contacts. A great source is those who already give to you and other similar organizations. See who can move up to bigger donations.
- **Reach out to the community.** Be open to speaking at all kinds of gatherings to get access to new people, such as the chamber of commerce, places of worship, alumni and professional networks, colleges and universities.
- **Do joint events with socially responsible investment professionals.** There's a good chance that the people who show up will be interested in your work as well.

- **Hit your social networking sites.** Make sure you scour your Facebook family and those following you on Twitter for new people to reach out to.

As you develop new prospects, share the list with your board, staff, fundraising committee and funders to see who knows whom and how they can help you develop a relationship. Do this and you'll realize that you know more major donor prospects than you ever thought possible.

Now You Have a List – What's Next?

Many of the relationship-building aspects highlighted in this section work with both donors and funders, but there are a few differences. Individuals have priorities and interests, but they tend to be driven by the heart. Their giving is not guided by the same kinds of mission statements and established goals that foundations have.

Where staff members represent foundations, individuals represent themselves, possibly with the support of an assistant or a financial advisor. Individuals can be approached directly and tend to be less formal than foundations in how they consider gifts. They have no cutoff dates or waiting periods – they can make a donation whenever they want, for as much as they want, for as long as they want, to whatever cause they want.

Foundation staff members often don't have that kind of flexibility. They frequently are being judged by the strength of their program areas, the kinds of grants they make and the success of their grantees. Think about how funding your work will help the foundation be successful, and also think about other ways foundation staff can help you beyond providing funding, such as being an advocate, translator or bridge-builder. It is critical, too, that you read the foundation's guidelines thoroughly and make sure you talk about your work in the context of its priorities. Try

putting yourself in the shoes of the program officer and figure out what materials, approaches and communication *you* would like.

Relationships take work. Your attitude and respect for the person you are (or will be) soliciting is crucial. Be upbeat, enthusiastic, passionate, thoughtful, truthful and engaging. Program officers and donors are looking for a connection to your organization through you. The Linchpin Campaign has done extensive research with donors of organizing that uncovers their understandings and motivations.

Before you even approach anyone for financial support, make sure you are prepared:

- **Be able to give easy-to-understand definitions** of the basics including: organizing, organizer, campaign, member, leader, strategy, power, power analysis and one-on-ones.
- **Be ready to give short examples and illustrations** that you can use to demonstrate what these terms mean, and be able to go more in-depth on these definitions depending on the experience and orientation of the funder or donor.
- **Be clear about your organization**, where it is now and what the vision is for the future, and how the definitions above can be demonstrated by what your organization is doing.

Donors can't and won't support what they don't understand. And they can't help you with introductions to other possible supporters if they can't explain what you do.

And don't forget to listen deeply. We can't emphasize this enough. You want to get the donors or program officers talking about what they

believe in, why they are doing this work, how they are approaching issues and problems, their philosophy and that of their foundation. Do they care about a particular issue area, constituency or city? What is their background, profession or faith, and how does that impact their giving? Listen actively and with focus so that you can build bridges between their interests and yours.

The first time a donor or funder gives your organization money, it is an act of faith upon which trust will be built. The initial faith will turn into trust as you demonstrate the power of your work and that you are doing and delivering what you said you would. Let him celebrate with you the advances and victories you achieve.

But also be ready to let the donor know when things don't work out or if you have to make a change. Be prepared to share your learnings and analysis. No donor or funder wants to hear bad news through the grapevine. Make sure you are the one to be in touch first. In this time of viscous attacks on organizers, this is especially crucial. Let your donors know how they can be good allies to you.

Be sure to stay in touch when you are not asking for money. Shoot them quick e-mails with an article attached just because you thought they might find it interesting. Let funders know you are ready to be on a panel or be interviewed for an article. Send them motivating press coverage or blog posts about your organization.

There is nothing like a good road trip to build relationships. You know how great car talks can be. Take your donors and funders on quality site visits. For some trips, invite several donors to join you at once. Let them witness trainings, go with you on a congressional visit, or sit with you during an accountability session with you and 1,000 of your members. Some donors would love to walk a picket line with you. Being

part of what is going on – including strategy discussions and debriefings – can be very exciting to a funder or donor. Seeing your members in action and participating in some way will allow your donors and funders to tell their own stories about your organization and strengthen their bond with community organizing.

Remember to keep good records about all contacts. Make sure they are up-to-date and, with donors, make sure they are confidential. Be clear about who has access to the information. In your records, be mindful about personal issues as well. If your donor is being honored, call to say how deserving the award is. Is her daughter graduating college? Call to offer congratulations.

One final word about building relationships – don't forget to thank donors and funders for their support. Let them know your sincere appreciation. Find out if they want public or confidential recognition. Submit timely reports, mail handwritten thank-you cards right after a meeting or receiving a check, and plan social get-togethers over a meal. Let them feel your gratitude in ways that are genuine, and develops their dignity and self-esteem in ways that reinforce their smart choice in supporting you, your organization and community organizing.

The hallmarks of community organizing are public relationships, personal transformation and social change through the power of people. Successful connections with donors are about much the same and worth your time and energy to build and maintain.

Communicating the Impact of Your Work

Having a list of the right prospects and building relationships with them won't help you raise more money if you can't communicate effectively why the work of your organization matters. You need to be able to tell a compelling story about the

impact your organization has had and will have on people and communities – and you'll need to be able to tell that story in different ways to different audiences.

Some funders and donors are “numbers” people. They want to know, in dollars and cents, the impact of your work. They want to figure out why they should invest in your organization instead of supporting someone else. So for these folks, you need to figure out credible ways to quantify the value of your wins. The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy has been doing a series of reports using this approach and you can mine them for examples. To illustrate, the following is a description of one of the organizations featured in our report that focuses on community organizing efforts in Minnesota:

“Three Rivers Community Action participated in the Jobs Now Coalition, which secured an increase in the minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.15 per hour. Working its local connections, Three Rivers Community Action got a Republican legislator, a small business owner in a rural district, to sign onto the bill. Making support for the bill bipartisan and engaging business owners, who typically oppose wage increases, helped pass the legislation. This increase benefits 117,000 workers, adding approximately \$130 million per year to the state's wage base beginning in 2006.”

Be careful, however, not to misunderstand what kind of numbers donors are looking for. Organizers care about turnout and the growth of their organizations – and rightly so. For most foundations and major donors, however, that growth in power is only a means to an end. Those aren't the numbers they care most about. Sure, hardcore funders of organizing will want to know those things. But most funders want to know how your efforts will have an impact on

people's lives. For them, the growth in power of your organization simply means that you have the capacity to deliver campaign victories or to change public policies. It's the issue, constituency or place they care most about, not the power-building.

Some organizers gripe about this seeming disconnect, lamenting the lack of funders and donors who care about organizing for its own sake. But the organizers who raise the most money accept the reality and adapt. Over time, many funders who begin supporting organizing because of the issues grow to appreciate the value of the work in its own right and become less driven by issues and more driven by power.

Communicating the impact of your work using hard numbers won't resonate with all your prospects; there is a significant group of funders and donors that love to hear personal stories. They don't care so much that 4,000 people got access to health services. They want to hear about (and from) Maria, your member, and her two children; why they needed access to care, and how she is emblematic of many other Marias in your organization; how she got involved, and how her family's lives were changed as a result of your organization's campaign. They want to hear that you added 1,000 buses to the city's fleet, but they also want to hear how Trevor was able to get a new job across town using the expanded bus system. Organizers who are successful fundraisers are able to tell compelling stories that make the numbers real.

Communicating clearly about the impact of your organization's past victories is only part of the battle. It establishes that your organization can get things done and knows how to have real impact on important issues. But funders and donors don't often give out money for past accomplishments. They'll fund you for what you're working on right now or for what you're going to be working on in the next few years.

This means that you need to be able to communicate not only about the problems you are fighting against, but about the positive impact you expect to achieve in the long run when you win the campaign. What will be different in your community when you win the campaign? How will people's lives change?

Be patient with funders who struggle to understand the critical role that process plays in organizing. Help them make the connections that show why doing so many one-on-one visits is essential for developing leadership, which in turn leads to authentic and powerful campaigns. Process is key to achieving outcomes and is an essential part of being participatory. Doing research, educating people, conducting role-plays, building leadership teams, practicing testimony and building alliances all are essential elements that help organizing draw ordinary people into civic life and achieve an impressive bang for the buck.

For many foundations, but not so much for individual donors, it really will help if you have a logic model and can articulate a theory of change. If you've never seen a logic model or never articulated your theory of change, ask a friendly program officer to help you get started thinking about developing one, or consult an online guide. According to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, "Basically, a logic model is a systematic and visual way to present and share your understanding of the relationships among the resources you have to operate your program, the activities you plan and the changes or results you hope to achieve."

You don't always need logic models with foundations that already are committed to funding organizing, but they often are valuable with grantmakers who aren't already part of the choir. ActKnowledge says on its web site theoryofchange.org that, "A Theory of Change provides a roadmap to get you from here to there. If it is good and complete, your roadmap can be read by others

and show that you know how to chart your course. This is helpful with constituents, staff, partner organizations and funders.”

Conclusion

We often say that people who fundraise for community organizing are the unsung heroes of social justice. We count ourselves in those numbers. And now is our time because never before have so many taken up the ideas of community organizing and been open to funding such groups. Whether donors and funders see organizing as a tool, a strategy or a philosophy, they are embracing it as a successful practice and seeing the power of what it accomplishes.

Yes, there is a recession. But, so what! Even with the recession, there still is a lot of money out there.

Resources

Here are a few of the most relevant resources we think will be immediately helpful to organizers in their efforts to raise more money. If you're reading this online, there are hyperlinks. If you're reading a printed a copy, please visit www.ncrp.org/files/publications/seizingthemoment.pdf to get the links.

The reports associated with NCRP's [Grantmaking for Community Impact Project](#) can help you get ideas for how to talk about the impact of your work in ways that will resonate with funders. Reports already have been produced for New Mexico, North Carolina and Minnesota. Additional resources also can be found on that site.

The Linchpin Campaign's publication [UNTAPPED: How Community Organizers Can Develop and Deepen Relationships with Major Donors And Raise Big Money](#) is absolutely essential reading. It will help you understand how to relate best to major donors.

The Center for Community Change commissioned a paper a few years ago that has some really helpful ideas that are still relevant today: [Promising Practices in Revenue Generation for Community Organizing: An exploration of current and emerging fundraising and grantmaking practices in community organizing](#). Shelterforce also published an [excellent summary](#) of that full report.

Grantcraft and The Linchpin Campaign published a guide for funders interested in community organizing: [Funding Community Organizing: Social Change through Civic Participation](#). It's useful for organizers to understand what grantmakers may be thinking about in relation to their work.

The Foundation Center recently published [Social Justice Grantmaking II: An Update on U.S. Foundation Trends](#). The report highlights are available for free; the [full report](#) costs \$40 but is worth the price.

Since when do organizers wait for a sunny day to fight for social justice? Our communities can't wait! The need is too great and the opportunity to effect change too important. There are donors and funders looking for you and looking for ways to invest their resources to make a difference locally, regionally, nationally.

So go and make your case! Create a fundraising plan. Start your major donor campaign today! Call your current funders and ask them to make introductions for you. Build relationships. Find new donors and funders, using all your resources through members, other supporters, at meetings, on line, through Facebook and even Twitter.

Don't just sit there; fund-raise!

The [members of the Neighborhood Funders Group](#) are institutional grantmakers who are quite open to funding community organizing. Consider this a prospect list. But be sure to do some research to ensure there is a good fit before approaching them.

The [Grassroots Institute for Fundraising Training \(GIFT\)](#) is a terrific resource. You might consider subscribing to its [Grassroots Fundraising Journal](#) or attending one of its training sessions.

We also recommend resources available from the [Alliance for Justice](#). It has online tools for evaluating community organizing and provides clear advice for funders about how they can support this important work.

For education organizers, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation's six-year study measuring the impact of community organizing on student outcomes is an excellent resource. Conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, [Organized Communities, Stronger Schools: a Preview of Research Finding](#) demonstrates the positive influence organizing can have on education.

You also might consider keeping up with the blogs that cover philanthropic issues as a way to keep yourself in the loop about current discussions. Some of the best are: [The Agitator](#), [Keeping a close eye](#), [Donor Power Blog](#), [Philantopic](#), [Tactical Philanthropy](#) and [Philanthropy 2173](#). These blogs cover many aspects of philanthropy, not just funding for organizing.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has a useful guide to developing a logic model, appropriately titled [Logic Model Development Guide](#).

About the Authors

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