
Why People of Color Need to Be Good Fundraisers

By MIKE ROQUE

When I started out in fundraising ten years ago, I was usually the only person of color in the room. Today, the situation is much the same. Whether it is a meeting with a potential donor to my organization or a training I am giving to the fundraising committee of a nonprofit organization, the people in the room are usually white, except for me.

Even within people-of-color organizations or multi-racial organizations, often the people who do the bulk of the fundraising are white. I could give a long diatribe on how society oppresses people of color and wants to keep them from controlling money or talk about how people of color's internalized oppression keeps them from taking control of money. But instead, I want to challenge progressive nonprofits to be more aware of the power dynamics of who raises money for them, and I want to challenge people of color to train themselves and others to be good fundraisers.

The one thing I remember most from the first fundraising training I went to taught by Kim Klein is her saying, "Those who control the money, control the organization." I was then a community organizer with a small, mostly Chicano community organization in southern Colorado. The board of the organization was 70% Chicano, mostly low-income members, yet the fundraising committee was made up of three white people. It was much the same with other organizations with which I worked over the years. Now, after fundraising for both small community organizing groups and large foundations, I still find truth in Kim's statement: Those who control the money, control the organization.

I believe that people of color have been systematically excluded from fundraising for nonprofit organizations. I do not believe that it has been a malicious exclusion or a conspiracy that needs to be investigated by Mulder and Scully. But many organizations have simply not examined the power dynamics of their fundraising work. In this article I put forth six reasons that people of color have been excluded from fundraising and offer ways for organizations to recruit, develop and maintain people of color as fundraisers.

WHY PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE EXCLUDED FROM FUNDRAISING

There are a number of reasons that people of color are not asked to participate in an organization's fundraising.

- **Program Work Only.** The first board I joined promptly put me on the program committee, even though my interest was with finance. This being my first board membership, I just did what they told me. Often when people of color are brought onto boards, the organization restricts them to programmatic work or, worse, uses them in public relations efforts to give the appearance of being diverse.

- **Banker Boards.** We've all been through a Junior League-type training in which the first thing they say is that you need to fill your board with bankers, company presidents, and other prominent (i.e., rich) people. This often leaves people of color out.

- **It's Who You Know.** Unlike the previous reason for the lack of people of color on a board, in this model the board members themselves don't have to be rich, just know rich people. Even well-intentioned organizations buy into this

trap of only putting people on the finance/fundraising committee who already know potential funders — both individual donors and foundations. This usually means people with connections to well-off people. Again, assuming that they would not have such contacts, organizations mistakenly leave people of color off.

- **Lack of Training.** Organizations want people on board and staff who can come in and fundraise from day one. In addition, they want them to understand often unnecessarily complicated financial statements. If organizations are not willing to put the time and money into training new fundraisers, they run the risk of burning out existing fundraisers and not having anyone to take their place.

- **“We Are So Glad Just to Have You.”** Often organizations are just so happy to have people of color (especially their first) on their boards that they do not hold them to the same standards as other board members. If giving a personal gift and fundraising are responsibilities of other board members (which they should be for every organization) then they should be for people of color too.

- **Fear of Losing Control.** When organizations begin to recruit board members outside of the original founders — whether it’s people of color, gays and lesbians, rural folks, etc. — the very nature of the organization changes. This change happens most dramatically when new people begin to raise money from different constituencies. The organization becomes accountable to a new group of people and the original members of the organization can feel threatened or left out. If you want people of color to share in the ownership of the organization, you need to give up some control.

CHALLENGE TO ORGANIZATIONS

In order to overcome these reasons for people of color being excluded from fundraising, organizations are going to have to look at themselves more closely and change some of their behaviors.

- **Be Aware of Power Dynamics.** Organizations should examine the makeup of their fundraising committee and fundraising staff. This fundraising team tends to have little turnover, indicating its importance within the organization. Even when people of color join a fundraising committee, they’re often not made to feel included or productive. They will serve for one or two years but then rotate off, often feeling that they did not make a difference or were not wanted. This can lead to stagnation and complacency on behalf of the organization and eventually burnout of the members. Even within the most progressive organizations, I have noticed that much of their fundraising team is

white. Organizations need to make a point of examining their fundraising team every year and recruiting people of color specifically to serve on the fundraising team.

- **Invest in Training.** Organizations need to make a commitment to invest in fundraising training for new committee and staff members. Even experienced staff and committee members will benefit from training. Or, the experienced folks can provide the training for newer members. Training does not have to be expensive. Look around for low-cost training opportunities and get as many of your members to them as possible. Or, try to pull together other nonprofits and share the cost of bringing in a trainer or, better yet, get a foundation to underwrite a training workshop.

- **Seek Money from Communities of Color.** When bringing people of color to the fundraising team, trust them to know how to approach fundraising in their community. If this is something the organization has not tried before, don’t automatically assume it will not be effective or appropriate for your group. Communities of color have been supporting their own issues in informal ways for years. Use fundraising basics (you have to ask), but don’t be afraid of trying new fundraising methods. I have seen successful pig ear sales, church appeals, and salsa dances (obviously not everything is appropriate for every group). By reaching out to communities of color to raise funds, your organization will tap into another source of money and make contact with other people of color who may one day become board members.

- **Plan for Transitions.** Organizations need to plan carefully for leadership transitions, especially when a person of color is replacing a white (oftentimes founding) executive director or development director. Progressive organizations often try to recruit people of color when hiring new staff people. This is an important effort and needs to be encouraged, but don’t overlook the organizational dynamics of that transition. Without transition activities built into the move from one staff person to the next, the person of color is put into a position where no one can succeed. Organizations need to consider that, if the previous executive or development director has done their job well, funders (individuals and foundations) will have a strong relationship with him or her. The organization must take the time for a systematic transition of these relationships from the outgoing to the new director. Also, the organization should ensure that the rest of the fundraising team will stay on to facilitate a transfer of organizational memory.

CHALLENGE TO PEOPLE OF COLOR

People of color also need to meet the challenges of becoming more involved in fundraising. Here are some things we can do to increase our visibility and effectiveness as fundraisers.

- **Join Boards, Join Fundraising Committees.** When asked to join a board, do a thorough investigation of the organizational and board dynamics. Don't join the board unless you have the time and commitment to give it your full effort. Once you join, demand to be put onto the fundraising or finance committee and learn where the real power lies. Even if "numbers" are not your strong point, join. If you're not clear on the fundraising strategy or an item on the financial statements, ask questions. Number geeks (which I consider myself to be) love people who are interested in learning more about what financial statements say. Once you've mastered the basics, the rest is easy.

- **Go to Any and All Trainings You Can.** Training, training, and more training. You can never get enough training. Be on the lookout for training opportunities. Ask the organization you work with to pay for you to attend.

- **Raise Our Own Money and Create Our Own Organizations.** As people of color, we need to be good fundraisers. We need to raise our own money from our own communities and create and sustain our own organizations. If we are to see substantial change within our communities we need to be able to control our destiny. Remember, those who control the money, control the organization. If we hope to truly develop self-determination in our communities, we must be able to sustain institutions within our communities financially, whether nonprofit organizations or businesses. Being a good fundraiser is a strong step in that direction.

This does not mean we should not work with each other or with white organizations; we all need to support each other's struggle for justice and equality.

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