To Achieve Racial Justice in Philanthropy, We Must Invest in Fundraising and Make It Inclusive

By Armando Enrique Zumaya | MARCH 11, 2021

I’m an old guy. I remember when Disco was hot, and music came on records. I have worked in fundraising for more than three decades so I’ve heard many views on philanthropy over the years.

Today there is much discussion of racial justice and decolonizing philanthropy. When we talk about this critical need, we should stop and listen carefully. A few chronic misperceptions continue, and some tough things need to be said.

First, foundations only represent a small segment of philanthropy. Many grant makers, nonprofit leaders, and fundraisers seem to assign an outsize amount of clout to foundations. Foundations account for just 18 percent of money going to charity. Individuals account for 70 percent.

So when we talk about making philanthropy more inclusive, if we’re only focused on foundations, we’ve overlooked most charitable giving. To decolonize philanthropy, we must acknowledge the following realities and do something few foundations or big donors ever do: invest in fundraising.

**Fundraising produces philanthropy.** This bears repeating. The way people talk today implies that philanthropy — even when it’s community-centered — comes from well-meaning rich people who just seem to get it in their minds to give, and giant checks magically appear. Sure, that happens sometimes, but most contributions result from the hard work of development officers. If you’d like to understand philanthropy, ask your development officers.

To decolonize philanthropy, we need to create diversity in fundraising. That
means that we raise money from the whole community: all colors, all sexual preferences, all religions, all genders, and, yes, all incomes. Right now, raising money is designed to approach and engage old, straight white men — especially in major-gift fundraising. This is true for a range of reasons: racism, implicit bias, and the reality that most nonprofit CEOs and boards are 90 percent white. A diverse fundraising team can begin to change this by reaching out to new and different people in new and different ways. Often the problem is simply missed so no one acts to fix it even though doing so just makes good fiscal sense.

Giving and fundraising are empowering. We must share that power more broadly. That means we should define the Latina single mom giving $25 a month to her local women’s shelter as a philanthropist and a priority. Nonprofits give her a means to empower herself. If we are running a children’s health organization in Atlanta, for example, then we should have African American major donors, not just old white people, and the number of women donors should reflect the community.

Often white leaders see working people of color as victims. Real philanthropy means we have given everyone the opportunity to improve their communities and the world. Giving is power. And too often we intentionally give that power only to the rich and white.

Most nonprofits don’t invest in fundraising, and foundations don’t, either. To me, true equity at a nonprofit is a board on which wealthy people of color sit with wealthy white people and everyone writes checks of similar value to support the work. No tokens. Does that sound like I am dreaming? It is actually fairly straightforward, and you can develop true equity on your board through good fundraising. It’s what good major-gift prospecting should produce.

Yet 70 percent of nonprofits have never tried to implement a major-giving program. We need to invest in nonprofits’ abilities to diversity fundraising methods as well as the populations we engage. It’s about teaching nonprofits to fish rather than endlessly giving them fish.

To make fundraising and philanthropy more inclusive, we must:

- Make a long-term and deep investment in fundraising
- Diversify the ranks of fundraising through promotions and new hires.
- Examine fundraising and identify parts of your community you’re not approaching and try to understand why?
- Redefine who is a philanthropist. Focus our efforts on community-focused, inclusive fundraising.
- Keep asking: Why don’t foundations make grants that support development department

We have seen a lot of hand wringing about the lack of diversity and equity in fundraising for 20 years. I think it’s past time to think about this issue or have conversations. I believe it’s time for action, investments, and change.

Along with other Latinx fundraising leaders, we are tackling these issues head on. Nationally, we have founded Somos El Podrón, the first Latinx fundraising institute. There are other great organizations working in similar ways for African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.

Foundation leaders and individuals, please join us as catalysts in this work. Ask hard and uncomfortable questions. Help us challenge norms. Write big grants to
strengthen fundraising. Support diversity and equity in fundraising. Partner with your development professionals to talk about all aspects of philanthropy. If we work together, we can bring about lasting change: Sí, se puede!

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

Armando Enrique Zumaya
Armando Enrique Zumaya helped found Somos El Poder, a Latinx fundraising institute.

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