By Professor Russell James III

The Epic Fundraiser

Myth, Psychology, and the Universal Hero Story in Fundraising

The Epic Fundraiser:

Myth, Psychology, and the Universal Hero Story in Fundraising

The Fundraising Myth & Science Series: Book II

Russell James III, J.D., Ph.D.

Professor
Director of Graduate Studies in Charitable Financial Planning and CH Foundation Chair in Personal Financial Planning
Texas Tech University

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The Fundraising Myth & Science Series

Book I: **The Storytelling Fundraiser**: The Brain, Behavioral Economics, and Fundraising Story

Book II: **The Epic Fundraiser**: Myth, Psychology, and the Universal Hero Story in Fundraising

Book III: **The Primal Fundraiser**: Game Theory and the Natural Origins of Effective Fundraising

Book IV: **The Socratic Fundraiser**: Using Questions to Advance the Donor's Story

PROFESSOR RUSSELL JAMES

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS FUNDRAISING SELLING?

THE STORY THAT ENHANCES IDENTITY

Selling "nothing"?

Fundraisers work in "sales." OK. But then what, exactly, do fundraisers sell? One shared this,

> "My then-boyfriend, who worked in sales, told his colleagues (admiringly, I think) that 'Beth makes a living out of selling *nothing*!'"[1]

Although misguided, this comment points to an important question. What exactly *do* fundraisers sell?

This can be a tricky question even in simple product sales. Suppose we sell drills. People buy a drill because they want a drill, right? Not really. The saying goes, "No one wants a drill. What they want is the hole."[2]

[1] Breeze, B. (2017). *The new fundraisers: Who organizes charitable giving in contemporary society?* Policy Press. p. xi

[2] Quote Investigator. (2019, March 23). No one wants a drill. What they want is the hole [Website]. https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/03/23/drill/

The question goes further. People don't actually want holes.[3] Holes aren't the benefit. They want shelves hung in the garage. They want a deck on their house. Shelves and decks require holes. Making holes requires a drill.

What drives a sale is the *benefit*, not the product. Understanding what we're selling means understanding the *benefit*.

What about fundraising? What *benefit* do donors get?

What do fundraisers sell?

If fundraisers are selling something, what is it? There are many popular answers:

- We sell the mission.
- We sell the organization.
- We sell the cause.
- We sell sponsorships.
- We sell impact.

Each of these can be important. Each can be part of the story. But unless they *benefit* the donor, they aren't what the fundraiser is selling.

[3] McKelvey, S. (2012, August 8). Why that whole "people don't want a drill, they want a hole" thing doesn't go far enough [Website]. https://www.websearchsocial.com/why-that-whole-people-dont-want-a-drill-they-want-a-hole-thing-doesnt-go-far-enough/

What does the donor walk away with in the end? What is the ultimate benefit *to the donor* from the gift?[4] What *benefit* is the fundraiser selling?

It is one thing. It is an enhanced identity.[5]

- It can be private. This delivers internal meaning.
- It can be public. This delivers external reputation.

Identity enhancement in the monomyth

One sentence sums up the fundraising advice in this book:

Advance the donor's hero story.

Doing this delivers an enhanced identity. This works because the hero's journey *is* an identity enhancement process.[6]

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[4] In a general sales context, this key issue can be addressed by answering the central question, "How will this customer be different as a result of doing business with us?" McLeod, L. E. (2012). *Selling with noble purpose: How to drive revenue and do work that makes you proud.* John Wiley & Sons. p. 50.

[5] This discussion focuses on identity enhancement in its most basic form. This can be as simple as, e.g., "I feel better about myself after I give." However, this touches on the substantially more complex journey of individuation. Individuation "denotes the process by which a person becomes a psychological 'in-dividual,' that is, a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole.' Jung, C. G. (1990). The archetypes and the collective unconscious. In H. Read, M. Fordham & G. Adler (Eds.), R.F.C. Hull (Trans.). *The collected works of C. G. Jung.* Vol 9 (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 275.

[6] For elaborations of this concept, see *e.g.,* Elenbaas, J. D. (2016). *Excavating the mythic mind: Origins, collapse, and reconstruction of personal myth on the journey toward individuation.* [Ph.D. dissertation]. Pacifica Graduate Institute; Gerhold, C. (2011). *The hero's journey through adolescence: A Jungian archetypal analysis of "Harry Potter"*. [Ph.D. dissertation]. The Chicago School of Professional Psychology.

The universal hero story is called the monomyth.[7] It includes specific steps. The hero

1. Begins in the ordinary world
2. Is faced with a challenge (the call to adventure)
3. Rejects then accepts the call and enters the new world
4. Undergoes ordeals and overcomes an enemy
5. Gains a reward or transformation, and
6. Returns to the place of beginning with a gift to improve that world.

Through these steps, the hero's story progresses through

Original Identity [1] → **Challenge** [2, 3, 4] → **Victory** [4, 5] → **Enhanced Identity** [5, 6]

Original identity

The journey starts at the source of original identity. This is the hero's home, people, and values. (In the narrative arc, this is *backstory and setting*.)

Challenge

A challenge forces a decision in response to a threat or an opportunity. The threat or

[7] Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 1.

opportunity affects the hero's home, people, or values. The challenge motivates action with the hope of victory. It launches the hero's journey. (In the narrative arc, this is the *inciting incident*.)

Victory

After facing ordeals, the hero is victorious. The hero gains a reward or transformation. (In the narrative arc, this is the *climax*.)

Enhanced identity

The journey results in a new identity. The main character becomes a victorious hero. This identity can be internal (private) and/or external (public). The hero returns with a gift to benefit the original world. The journey ends where it started. But now the original world and the original identity have been improved. (In the narrative arc, this is the *resolution*.)

In three words, the monomyth cycle is[8]

Challenge
↗ ↘
Identity ← Victory

Identity enhancement in fundraising

These are not just steps in the hero's journey. These are elements for the ideal donor experience. A heroic donation matches the monomyth cycle. It is

> *A sacrificial gift that protects the donor's people and values in a crisis.*

This links challenge, identity, and victory.

[a sacrificial gift] *[in a crisis]*
Challenge
↗ ↘
[the donor's people & values] **Identity ← Victory** *[that protects]*

Each step comes from the previous one. Each results in the next.

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[8] Campbell uses a three-step circular illustration with this description:

> "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 28.

I label these steps as follows:

The beginning point of "the world of common day" is "**original identity**."
"Venturing forth into a region of supernatural wonder" is "**challenge**."
"Fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won" is "**victory**."
"The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" is "**enhanced identity**."

I apply this both to a scenario where the charitable gift serves as part of the final step in the heroic life story and where the gift request itself constitutes the challenge that promises a victory delivering enhanced identity.

A challenge forces a decision in response to a crisis (threat or opportunity). In fundraising, the challenge is to make a sacrificial gift.[9]

This challenge must link back to the donor's identity. Identity comes from one's people, values, and life story. The challenge responds to a threat or opportunity. But it should be a threat or opportunity *for the donor's people or values*. The challenge should *originate in* the donor's identity.

The challenge must also promise the hope of a victory. The promised victory *results in* protecting the donor's people or values. It enhances the donor's identity. The donor becomes a hero. The donor becomes a sacrificial protector of his people and values. This new status might be private, delivering personal meaning. It might be public, enhancing reputation. It might be both.

The effective challenge promises this full story cycle. It links to the donor's original identity, victory, and enhanced identity. The ideal donor experience

[9] Philip Zimbardo, Professor Emeritus at Stanford and Founder/President of the Heroic Imagination Project, explains that heroes can be ordinary people "who engage in extraordinary actions to help others in need or in defending a moral cause, doing so aware of personal risk and loss, and without expectation of material gain for their action." Zimbardo, P. (2017). Foreword. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership.* Routledge. p. xxi.
Similarly, Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo define heroism as, "Heroism is the willingness to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause." Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Heroism: A conceptual analysis and differentiation between heroic action and altruism. *Review of General Psychology, 15*(2), 99-113. p. 113.

completes this story cycle. It results in an enhanced identity for the donor.

This story requires connecting with the donor's identity. Does this mean the story's main character must be the donor? No, although that strategy works. It means the donor must *identify with* the story's characters or values. The story's characters must be, in some important way, *like* the donor. The story's values must be *like* the donor's values. This turns *a* story into *the donor's* story.

The value of a polestar

Isn't calling a donation *heroic* a bit much? Does writing a $20 check *have* to be an epic event? Of course not.

So why focus on the *heroic* donation? Because it is the ideal.[10] Understanding the ideal is important. It's like having a compass. A compass is useful even if we aren't going all the way to the North Pole.

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[10] The role of heroism is to establish an ideal. In the introduction to the largest collection of academic work on heroism, the editors begin by explaining, "Heroism represents the pinnacle of human behavior. The most noble act that a human being can perform is a heroic act, and the most distinguished life that a human being can lead is a heroic life." As a pinnacle, heroism is necessarily an extreme example. In its extremity it serves as a polestar by which to measure our acts and our lives. But the attraction to heroism is not just for the few. Instead, it is "central to our humanity." Its pursuit opens the path to personal transformation and deep meaning.

Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R, & Kramers, R. M. (2017). Setting the scene: The rise of heroism science. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 1-16). Routledge. p. 1

Understanding the heroic donation is like knowing which way is north. As a giving opportunity moves closer to this heroic ideal, it becomes more compelling. No, the $20 donation request doesn't have to be epic. But the closer it moves to being heroic, the more compelling it is. The heroic donation gives "true north" for fundraising.

Heroism as a journey not a jump

Not all heroism occurs in a single instant. Heroism can include years of steady, quiet effort.[11] The accumulation of small acts can build a compelling hero story.[12]

Thus, neither heroism nor the donor's hero story is limited to the elite few.[13] The goal is to

[11] "Social heroism is typically less dramatic, unfolds over a much longer time period, and is frequently undertaken in private rather than public settings." Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Heroism: A conceptual analysis and differentiation between heroic action and altruism. *Review of General Psychology, 15*(2), 99-113. p. 101.

[12] The idea of heroism as a range of behaviors is reflected in Franco, Blau and Zimbardo's description of heroic imagination: it "can be seen as mind-set, a collection of attitudes about helping others in need, beginning with caring for others in compassionate ways, but also moving toward a willingness to sacrifice or take risks on behalf of others or in defense of a moral cause". Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Heroism: A conceptual analysis and differentiation between heroic action and altruism. *Review of General Psychology, 15*(2), 99-113. p. 111.

[13] "Modern treatments of heroism emphasize that heroes serve fundamental human needs (Allison & Goethals, 2014; Kinsella, Ritchie, & Igou, 2015a), and that all of humanity—not just a select group of moral elite—is capable of heroism (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011)." Allison, S.T., Goethals, G. R, & Kramers, R. M. (2017). Setting the scene: The rise of heroism science. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 1-16). Routledge. p. 3.
Citing to:
Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2014). "Now he belongs to the ages": The heroic leadership dynamic and deep narratives of greatness. In G. R. Goethals

advance the donor's hero story. A gift may be just one small step in that journey. But if we know the destination, each step will lead in the right direction.

Experimental research in fundraising

Not every donation must rise to the heroic level. But the pattern still fits. A compelling ask may not be heroic. But it will be a step in that direction. It will fit the pattern. It will have the elements of

Challenge
↗ ↘
Identity ← Victory

Original identity

This step connects the gift with the donor's people, values, and life story. These form the donor's "original world." They are the donor's sources of identity.

This isn't just a matter of literary speculation. It's what happens in experimental research. Giving increases when reminders highlight connections between

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et al. (Eds.), *Conceptions of leadership: Enduring ideas and emerging insights.* Palgrave Macmillan
Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Heroism: A conceptual analysis and differentiation between heroic action and altruism. *Review of General Psychology, 15*(2), 99-113.
Kinsella, E. L., Ritchie, T. D., & Igou, E. R. (2015). Lay perspectives on the social and psychological functions of heroes. *Frontiers in Psychology, 6*(130), 1-12. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00130.

- The donor's life story and the gift [14]
- The donor and the values supported by the gift, or [15]
- The donor and the people supported by the gift including
    - The beneficiaries (those the charity helps)[16]
    - The intermediaries (the charity, its fundraisers, or administrators), or [17]

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[14] James, R. N., III. (2015). The family tribute in charitable bequest giving: An experimental test of the effect of reminders on giving intentions. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 26*(1), 73-89.; James, R. N., III. (2016). Phrasing the charitable bequest inquiry. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 27(2), 998-1011. James, R. N., III. (March 7, 2016). Using biasing questions in charitable bequest surveys. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2744006; James, R. N., III., & O'Boyle, M. W. (2014). Charitable estate planning as visualized autobiography: An fMRI study of its neural correlates. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 43*(2), 355-373; Routley, C. J. (2011). Leaving a charitable legacy: Social influence, the self and symbolic immortality (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, p. 220 ("Indeed, when discussing which charities they had chosen to remember, there was a clear link with the life narratives of many respondents.")

[15] Guéguen, N. & Lamy, L. (2011). The effect of the word "love" on compliance to a request for humanitarian aid: An evaluation in a field setting. *Social Influence, 6*(4), 249-258; James, R. N., III. (2018). Increasing charitable donation intentions with preliminary importance ratings. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing, 15*(3), 393-411; Shariff, A. F. & Norenzayan, A. (2007). God is watching you: Priming god concepts increases prosocial behavior in an anonymous economic game. *Psychological Science, 18*(9), 803-809.

[16] Ben-Ner, A., McCall, B. P., Stephane, M., & Wang, H. (2009). Identity and in-group/out-group differentiation in work and giving behaviors: Experimental evidence. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 72*(1), 153-170. James, R. N., III. (2019). Using donor images in marketing complex charitable financial planning instruments: An experimental test with charitable gift annuities. *Journal of Personal Finance. 18*(1), 65-74.

[17] Bekkers, R. (2010). George gives to Geology Jane: The name letter effect and incidental similarity cues in fundraising. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 15*(2), 172-180.

- Other supporters (other donors or advocates).[18]

Challenge

A compelling challenge forces a decision in response to a threat or opportunity. The threat or opportunity affects the donor's people or values. (In other words, the *challenge* links back to *identity*.)

The challenge promises protection for those people or values. (In other words, the challenge links forward to a *victory* that links to *identity*.) These links appear in experimental results.

A challenge forces a decision. In fundraising, the ask is the challenge. The ask forces a decision. In experiments, asking increases donations.[19] Asking works. In other words, giving increases when there is a challenge.

[18] Tian, Y., & Konrath, S. (2021). The effects of similarity on charitable giving in donor–donor dyads: A systematic literature review. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations,* 1-24, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-019-00165-w

[19] Meer, J., & Rosen, H. S. (2011). The ABCs of charitable solicitation. *Journal of Public Economics, 95*(5-6), 363-371; Yörük, B. K. (2009). How responsive are charitable donors to requests to give? *Journal of Public Economics, 93*(9-10), 1111-1117; Sanders, M., & Smith, S. (2016). Can simple prompts increase bequest giving? Field evidence from a legal call centre. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 125*, 179-191. Castillo, M., Petrie, R., & Wardell, C. (2014). Fundraising through online social networks: A field experiment on peer-to-peer solicitation. *Journal of Public Economics, 114*, 29-35.

Giving also increases when the challenge addresses a threat or opportunity for the donor's people or values. This happens with

- An external threat attacking the donor's people or values, or [20]

[20] Consider the following reactions to perceived threats:

- Online donations to the ACLU grew from the typical $5 million to more than $120 million in the year after President Trump took office.
  See Reints, R. (July 5, 2018) The ACLU's membership has surged and it's putting its new resources to use. *Fortune.* http://fortune.com/2018/07/05/aclu-membership-growth/
- In the first two months after 9/11, donors gave over $1.5 billion in related donations.
  See, Barstow, D. & Henriques, D. B. (2001, November 17). A nation challenged the charities: I.R.S. makes an exception on terror aid. *New York Times*. p. B1.; See also, U.S. General Accounting Office (2002, December). *September 11: More effective collaboration could enhance charitable organizations' contributions in disasters*. GAO-03-259 at 7-8, https://www.gao.gov/assets/240/236312.pdf (Reporting the September 11th Fund raised more than half a billion dollars with the American Red Cross Liberty Fund raising over $1 billion); Steinberg, K. S., & Rooney, P. M. (2005). America gives: A survey of Americans' generosity after September 11. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 34*(1), 110-135.
- Dramatic increases in charitable donations also followed other terrorist attacks such as the Oklahoma City federal building bombing.
  See, Katz, R. A. (2003). A pig in a python: How the charitable response to September 11 overwhelmed the law of disaster relief. *Indiana Law Review, 36*, 251-333. p. 252. fn. 2.
- Similarly, Israelis living closer to terror attacks in Israel increased their charitable donations more than those living further away.
  See, Berrebi, C., & Yonah, H. (2016). Terrorism and philanthropy: the effect of terror attacks on the scope of giving by individuals and households. *Public Choice, 169*(3-4), 171-194.
- Emphasizing the threatened status of a species increases donations for related conservation projects.
  See, Curtin, P., & Papworth, S. (2018). Increased information and marketing to specific individuals could shift conservation support to less popular species. *Marine Policy, 88*, 101-107; Lundberg, P., Veríssimo, D., Vainio, A., & Arponen, A. (2020). Preferences for different flagship types in fundraising for nature conservation. *Biological Conservation, 250*, 108738. Veríssimo, D., Vaughan, G., Ridout, M., Waterman, C., MacMillan, D., & Smith, R. J. (2017).

- An internal threat of personally violating norms of the donor's people or values.[21]

Victory

Giving increases when the challenge promises a victory. This works when the gift promises a specific, visualizable result.[22] This fails when the impact is vague, or the problem is overwhelming.[23]

Enhanced identity

Identity enhancement is the ultimate goal. It's the fundamental value provided to donors. It's the "warm glow" from a gift.[24] It's the source of donor

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Increased conservation marketing effort has major fundraising benefits for even the least popular species. *Biological Conservation, 211*, 95-101.

[21] Croson, R., Handy, F., & Shang, J. (2009). Keeping up with the Joneses: The relationship of perceived descriptive social norms, social information, and charitable giving. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 19*(4), 467-489. Darlington, R. B. & Macker, C. E. (1966). Displacement of guilt-produced altruistic behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 4*(4), 442-443; Ohtsubo, Y. & Watanabe, E. (2013). Unintentional unfair behavior promotes charitable donation. *Letters on Evolutionary Behavioral Science, 4*(1), 1-4; Sachdeva, S., Iliev, R. & Medin, D. L. (2009) Sinning saints and saintly sinners the paradox of moral self-regulation. *Psychological Science, 20*(4), 523-528.

[22] Dickert, S., Kleber, J., Västfjäll, D., & Slovic, P. (2016). Mental imagery, impact, and affect: A mediation model for charitable giving. *PloS One, 11*(2), e0148274; Eckel, C. C., Herberich, D. H., & Meer, J. (2017). A field experiment on directed giving at a public university. *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics, 66*, 66-71.

[23] Erlandsson, A., Björklund, F., & Bäckström, M. (2014). Perceived utility (not sympathy) mediates the proportion dominance effect in helping decisions. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 27*(1), 37-47; Small, D. A., Loewenstein, G., & Slovic, P. (2007). Sympathy and callousness: The impact of deliberative thought on donations to identifiable and statistical victims. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 102*(2), 143-153.

[24] This matches the concept that economics literature identifies as "warm glow." Warm glow is not the result of the good social outcome; it is the result of the good social outcome *being caused by* the donor's actions. For example, warm glow is not the benefit I receive from some social problem being

happiness.[25] In experiments, it increases donations. This works with external identity – delivering public reputation.[26] It also works with internal identity – delivering personal meaning.[27]

corrected, even though that does improve my world. Instead, it is the additional utility I get when *I am the one* who corrected that problem. This first benefit says nothing about my role or my identity other than that I am a consumer who benefits from some socially desirable outcome. The second instead shows that I am a *producer* of a socially desirable outcome. It is the utility from this role as a producer, not just a consumer, of social benefit that the "warm glow" idea captures. When this role as a producer of social benefit is observed by others, it can also generate donor benefits from prestige. The concept of "warm glow" was established in economic analysis by Andreoni, J. (1989). Giving with impure altruism: Applications to charity and Ricardian equivalence. *Journal of Political Economy*, 97(6), 1447-1458, and Andreoni, J. (1990). Impure altruism and donations to public goods: A theory of warm-glow giving. *The Economic Journal*, 100(401), 464-477.

An example of otherwise inexplicable behavior is when most experimental participants donate from their funds even when the overall total contribution to the charity is preset and donations are anonymous as shown in Crumpler, H., & Grossman, P. J. (2008). An experimental test of warm glow giving. *Journal of Public Economics*, 92(5-6), 1011-1021. Separately, evidence of a prestige effects is widespread, such as that shown in Harbaugh, W. T. (1998). The prestige motive for making charitable transfers. *The American Economic Review*, 88(2), 277-282.

[25] This may be particularly important for high-net-worth philanthropy. One qualitative study of giving by the very wealthy found, "happiness appears to be a more or less explicit driving force for rich people's philanthropy." Sellen, C. (2019). Is philanthropy a way for the wealthy to convert wealth into happiness? Preliminary exploration in France. In Gaël Brulé & Christian Suter (Eds.), *Wealth and subjective well-being* (pp. 247-278). Springer. p. 247.

[26] Harbaugh, W. T. (1998). What do donations buy?: A model of philanthropy based on prestige and warm glow. *Journal of Public Economics, 67*(2), 269-284; Harbaugh, W. T. (1998). The prestige motive for making charitable transfers. *The American Economic Review, 88*(2), 277-282; Peasley, M. C., Coleman, J. T., & Royne, M. B. (2018). Charitable motivations: the role of prestige and identification. *The Service Industries Journal, 38*(5-6), 265-281.

[27] Shang, J., Reed, A., Sargeant, A., & Carpenter, K. (2020). Marketplace donations: The role of moral identity discrepancy and gender. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 57(2), 375-393.

Conclusion

Clever fundraising tricks can work. But mostly they work once.[28] After all the tricks and traps, either the donor experience was worth the gift, or it wasn't. Sustained success requires delivering real value. Fundraisers can do this. They can deliver real value to the donor.

The ultimate value to the donor from fundraising is enhanced identity. But this benefit comes at the *end* of the journey. It requires each step to make it work. If any step is weak or missing, the outcome will also be weak or missing. Understanding this explains much of what works – and what doesn't – in fundraising.

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[28] Bracht, J., & Feltovich, N. (2009). Whatever you say, your reputation precedes you: Observation and cheap talk in the trust game. *Journal of Public Economics, 93*(9-10), 1036-1044; Wilson, R. K., & Sell, J. (1997). "Liar, liar ..." Cheap talk and reputation in repeated public goods settings. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 41*(5), 695-717.
In another example, setting a charitable pledge as a default significantly increased pledges. But it also significantly increased reneging on the pledge. Ultimately, giving was not significantly greater when the pledge was set as a default. In other words, the default "trick" worked, but not for long. Gaudeul, A., & Kaczmarek, M. C. (2020, in press). Going along with the default does not mean going on with it: attrition in a charitable giving experiment. *Behavioural Public Policy*, 1-32. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/bpp.2019.3

1

THE DONOR AND THE UNIVERSAL HERO STORY

As fundraisers, what exactly do we have to offer donors? Their gift goes away. Even if we call it an "investment," it doesn't give *them* any financial benefits. (Or at least none worth the cost of the gift.) What do we offer that can compete with a cruise, a luxury car, or a bigger house? We actually do have something. Something important.

The heroic donor

Consuming more stuff is fine. But it doesn't make an inspirational story. Piling up more things is nice. But it doesn't make a meaningful journey.

Spending money only on yourself is not noble. Its impact is temporary. It ends when you end. No matter what you eat, wear, drive, or own, if your life is only about your own consumption, it's ultimately pretty meaningless. No one wants an obituary that reads simply, "He made a lot of money. The end."

That's where philanthropy comes in. Through philanthropy, donors can support meaningful values that transcend their own lives. They can impact others beyond themselves. They can leave a legacy that will last beyond their own lives. In short, philanthropy allows donors to be heroic.

The universal hero story

The desire for heroism is universal. It expresses what psychologist Carl Jung called an *archetype*. This is,

> "a spiritual goal toward which the whole nature of man strives."[1]

These universal, ancient patterns are, he explained,

> "inherited with the brain structure – indeed they are its psychic aspect."[2]

But it's not just the desire for heroism that is universal. The hero story itself is universal. In 1949, Professor Joseph Campbell published his famous book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In it, he examined hero stories from across the globe. He looked at hero stories in western cultures, eastern cultures, and island cultures. He looked at hero stories from indigenous tribes and industrialized

[1] Jung, C. (1953-1978). On the nature of the psyche. In H. Read, M. Fordham, & G. Adler (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (20 vols). Routledge. Volume VIII, para. 414.

[2] Jung, C. (1953-1978). Mind and earth. In H. Read, M. Fordham, & G. Adler (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (20 vols). Routledge. Volume X, para. 53.

societies. He looked at hero stories from history and modern day.

What he concluded was this: There may be a thousand different hero stories in a thousand different cultures. But each is just a variation of a single, underlying, primal hero story. He called this core human hero story the monomyth.

This universal monomyth contains specific story elements. The hero,

1. Begins in the ordinary world
2. Is faced with a challenge (the call to adventure)
3. Rejects then accepts the call and enters the new world
4. Undergoes ordeals and overcomes an enemy
5. Gains a reward or transformation, and
6. Returns to the place of beginning with a gift to improve that world.[3]

How important is this hero's journey? Bestselling author and screenwriter Steven Pressfield explains,

> "The hero's journey arose, both [Jung & Campbell] speculated, from the accumulated experience of the human race over millions of years. The hero's journey is like an operating

[3] This element can distinguish the hero's journey from the fairy tale. In a fairy tale, the protagonists may live happily ever after. But if the goal is not to return to a place of beginning to bring a benefit to that world, then the story isn't heroic. The victory in a fairy tale is, essentially, a personal or selfish one.

> system (or software in an operating system) that each of us receives at birth, hard-wired into our psyches, to help us navigate our passage through life."[4]

Humans are hardwired to communicate by story. So, too, we are hardwired to think in terms of the hero story. Pressfield explains,

> "The hero's journey is … the primal myth of the human race, the cosmic pattern that each of our lives follows (and a thousand increments thereof), whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not."[5]

The donor's hero story

How does this connect to fundraising? Philanthropy can address the core human need for heroism. By doing so, it becomes profoundly compelling. It becomes personally transformational.

This need for heroism is exactly fulfilled through the classic elements of the universal hero story. These story elements function as primal "flags." They trigger a deep resonance in humans.[6]

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[4] Pressfield, S. (2016). *Nobody wants to read your sh*t and other tough-love truths to make you a better writer.* Black Irish Entertainment LLC. p. 68.
[5] Pressfield, S. (2016, Sept. 17). *The inciting incident and "the call".* [Website]. https://stevenpressfield.com/2016/09/the-inciting-incident-and-the-call/
[6] "Ethologists call these structures innate releasing mechanisms, or IRMs. Each IRM is primed to become active when an appropriate stimulus – called a sign stimulus – is encountered in the environment. When such a stimulus appears, the innate mechanism is released, and the animal responds with a characteristic pattern of behavior …" Stevents, A. (2001). *Jung: A very short introduction.* Oxford University Press. pp. 51-52.

But let's get practical. How do these elements relate to the stories behind major donations? Consider the successful entrepreneur making a major gift to her alma mater:

- Does she go forth from the university (graduate) to enter a new world (the business world)? Yes.
- Does she undergo an ordeal and overcome enemies in that new world (building the business)? Yes.
- Does she gain a reward (wealth) and personal transformation? Yes.
- Does she return to her place of beginning (university) with a gift to improve that original world? Yes. (For example, establishing a scholarship for other women like her.)

Consider the cancer survivor giving back to support research and treatment:

- Does he face a challenge that interrupts his ordinary world (diagnosis)? Yes.
- Does he accept it and go forth, undergoing an ordeal (treatment)? Yes.
- Does he gain a reward (remission) and personal transformation? Yes.
- Does he then return to his place of beginning (diagnosis) with a gift to improve that original

world? Yes. (For example, funding new research or treatment for others like him.)

The universal hero story can fit any charitable cause. The place of beginning might be

- Growing up in a church
- Economic hardship
- The love for a pet, or
- Experiences in nature.

The gift might improve the world for other believers, others in need, animals, or the environment. Our causes may differ, but the core elements still apply.[7] And they don't apply just once.

[7] One study analyzed the letters accompanying 187 billionaires "giving pledge" commitments. (These were pledges to give at least half of their wealth to charity.) The researchers found that most letters included two elements. First, they included an origin story. The letters referenced family upbringing as the source motivating generosity. In the same way, the monomyth begins with the hero's origin story in his ordinary world.
Second, they referenced a desire not to give, but to "give back." Giving back is different than giving. It references a circular process. In the monomyth, the hero returns to the original world. The hero returns with a gift or "boon" to improve that world.
These letters also typically included a victory reference, mentioning how the giving would make an impact, make a difference, and help solve societal problems. Additionally, they also tended to include references to the personal benefits from giving. This included terms such as ''enjoyment,'' ''satisfaction,'' ''psychological returns,'' or ''pleasure''. The donor experience justified the gift. (It is also interesting to note that none of the letters referenced wealth inequality and only one referenced guilt.)
The monomyth can be thought of as progressing through **original identity → challenge → victory → enhanced identity**. The justification given in these largest of all gifts tended to include these same elements.
Schmitz, H. P., Mitchell, G. E., & McCollim, E. M. (2021). How billionaires explain their philanthropy: A mixed-method analysis of the giving pledge letters. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations,* 1-12.

The hero's journey is not just a one-shot story. It's a continuing, circular narrative in our lives. It's repeated, ongoing, and overlapping, but always relevant and always compelling.

This universal journey is common to all forms of storytelling. Professor Philip Zimbardo explains,

> "[Joseph Campbell's] highlighting of the special journey any person takes on the path to becoming a true hero has been the heart and soul of storytelling in movies, classical drama and literature." [8]

Spoiler alert: Epic Hollywood movies

The universal hero story deserves the ultimate "spoiler alert!" Now that you know the elements, you also know the plot for most epic Hollywood movies. The hero might be

- Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*
- Neo in *The Matrix*, or
- Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*.

But the universal hero story is the same. The hero begins in his ordinary (small, self-focused) world. For example,

- Luke is a Tatooine farm boy

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[8] Philip Zimbardo, Professor Emeritus at Stanford and Founder/President of the Heroic Imagination Project. Zimbardo, P. (2017). Foreword. in S.T. Allison, G.R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership.* Routledge. p. xxi.

- Neo is a dissatisfied corporate drone, or
- Bilbo is a Hobbit in the shire.

The hero faces the call to adventure. For example,

- Save Princess Leia
- Take the red pill, or
- Join the expedition.

The hero accepts, goes forth, and enters a new world. He undergoes an ordeal. He gains a reward or transformation. He returns with a gift to improve the world. For example,

- Luke destroys the Death Star. He becomes a Jedi Warrior who defends against the empire.
- Neo defeats Agent Smith. He becomes "the one" with the power to set the prisoners free.
- Bilbo helps defeat the Goblins. He becomes the keeper of the ring with peace restored.

The same story elements appear in all types of movies. The heroes can be

- Historical women (*Mulan*)
- Modern women (*The Devil Wears Prada*)
- Cartoon women (*Moana*)
- Lions (*The Lion King*)
- Ogres (*Shrek*)

- Wizards (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*), or
- Superheroes (*Avengers: Endgame*)

Why does Hollywood keep reusing this same universal hero story? Because it works. The highest-grossing film franchises are all hero stories.[9] It works because it's "hard wired into our psyches."[10]

As fundraisers, it's not enough just to use a story. We need to use the right story. And the right story – although it may have a thousand different faces – is actually the same story.[11] It is the donor's story. It is the donor's *hero* story.

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[9] For example: *Avengers* (Marvel), *Star Wars, Harry Potter, James Bond, The Lord of the Rings, X-Men, The Fast and the Furious, Jurassic Park, Spiderman, and Batman*.

[10] Pressfield, S. (2016). *Nobody wants to read your sh*t and other tough-love truths to make you a better writer.* Black Irish Entertainment LLC. p. 68.

[11] Indeed, these same themes emerge in observational analysis research. For example, Walker and Frimer (2007) studied a sample of moral heroes (having received either the Caring Canadian Award or the Medal of Bravery) and otherwise similar matched comparisons. They assessed these heroes and controls across the three levels of personality measurement: dispositional traits, motivational aspects, and integrative life narratives. They found significant differences only at the "deeper life-narrative level of personality description." In other words, the dispositions (e.g., extraversion) weren't different. The motivations weren't different. But the life stories were different. They were different in five specific ways. "Of the set of personality variables analyzed, five were identified as foundational, all at the life-narrative level of personality description: both agentic and communal motivation, themes of redemption, and intimation of formative relationships in early life as evidenced by secure attachments and the presence of 'helpers' who scaffolded development." Walker, L. J. (2017). The moral character of heroes. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 99-119). Routledge. p. 109.
These elements also appear in the monomyth. Redemption themes arise when a person has overcome and benefitted from negative events. (The hero undergoes a struggle, but ultimately comes out transformed and bearing a gift for the original world.) Agentic motives is about the belief that one can do or achieve something. (The hero succeeds.) Communal motives are about caring

for others in the group. (The hero returns with a gift to support the community.) Finally, the presence of helpers along the journey is a universal characteristic of the monomyth. *See,* Walker, L. J., & Frimer, J. A. (2007). Moral personality of brave and caring exemplars. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93*, 845-860.

2

THE FUNDRAISER IN THE UNIVERSAL HERO STORY

The monomyth

The hero is a fundamental human archetype. Jung describes an archetype as,

> "a spiritual goal toward which the whole nature of man strives." [1]

The monomyth is the hero's journey. It's the universal story of fulfilling the hero archetype. Joseph Campbell describes the journey this way:

> "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[2]

[1] Jung, C. (1953-1978). On the nature of the psyche. In H. Read, M. Fordham, & G. Adler (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (20 vols). Routledge. Volume VIII, para. 414.

[2] Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 28.

These same elements appear in the personal narratives behind major donations. The donor is the hero. The donor's life journey connects to the gift. The gift "bestows boons" on those from a donor's place of beginning.

These story elements are powerful and attractive. As a testament to this, they appear repeatedly in some of Hollywood's most successful movies. Whether the movie is *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *The Hobbit*, or many others, the elements are the same.

The fundraiser in the monomyth

Now I know what you might be thinking. You've seen all those movies. You don't remember there being a fundraiser in any of them!

Take a second look. In fact, there is a "fundraiser" character in every one. This "fundraiser" actually plays a key role in the monomyth. This monomyth character is *the guiding sage who challenges with a choice*. Hannah Ascough describes the start of the monomyth this way:

> "The story starts with a hero living in an ordinary world. This world is suddenly unbalanced by a disruption or threat and so a mentor approaches the hero and calls her to

> adventure, providing her with the wisdom and gifts necessary to seek a solution."[3]

Who is this character in the movies? In the original *Star Wars*, this is Obi-Wan Kenobi. Consider this conversation from *Star Wars*:

> OBI-WAN: You must learn the ways of the Force if you're to come with me to Alderaan.
>
> LUKE: Alderaan? I'm not going to Alderaan. I've got to get home. It's late. I'm in for it as it is!
>
> OBI-WAN: I need your help, Luke. She needs your help.

Obi-Wan is delivering the classic fundraiser appeal. "I need your help." "She needs your help." This is an appeal to make an impact on the larger world. It's an appeal to go beyond normal, self-focused, everyday life. It's an appeal to begin a heroic journey. It's the call to adventure.

Consider the effective major gift request:

- Is it a call to go forth from the ordinary, small, self-focused world of personal consumption? Yes.
- Is it a challenge to instead make an impact on the larger outside world? Yes.

[3] Ascough, R. (2018). Once upon a time: Using the hero's journey in development stories. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies/Revue canadienne d'études du développement*, 533-549. p. 535.

- Can the gift overcome an enemy or obstacle? Yes.
- Can the donor's journey create personal reward or transformation for the donor? Yes.
- Can it result in an improvement for the donor's original world? Yes.

The movie comparisons can be fun. But this isn't just movie trivia. The *Star Wars* script was intentionally constructed as an expression of the monomyth. Joseph Campbell helped write it.[4] In an interview, Bill Moyers relates,

> "[George Lucas] brought Campbell into the process of looking at his work on *Star Wars* and saying, 'Is this right? Am I getting it down? Is this the right emphasis? Is this the right character?' Joseph Campbell said to me, the best student he ever had was George Lucas."[5]

The monomyth is a worldwide narrative structure. It fulfills the primal human need for heroism. Within this universal human story – satisfying this basic human psychic need – there is a critical role. That critical role is the sage who challenges with a choice. That critical role is the fundraiser. Understanding your role as a fundraiser

[4] Larsen, S. & R. (2002). *Joseph Campbell: A fire in the mind*. Simon & Schuster (Inner Traditions). p. 541.

[5] Becker, E. (Producer), Burns, K., & Becker, E. (Directors). (2004). *Empire of dreams.* [Motion Picture]. United States: Prometheus Entertainment in association with Lucasfilm. 10:04 et seq.

within this primal narrative context can be helpful. In fact, it can be transformational.

The sage forces a choice

The effective fundraiser must ask. It's not enough to be friendly and tell good stories. The effective fundraiser must force a choice. The sage plays this same role.

In *The Matrix*, the sage Morpheus forces a stark choice. He confronts the (prospective) hero.

> "This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill, the story ends, you wake up in your bed .... You take the red pill; you stay in Wonderland."

As with young Luke Skywalker, the elements of the choice are the same:

- Stay in your ordinary, self-focused, small world, or
- Go on a journey to impact the larger world.

In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf challenges Bilbo by saying, "I'm looking for someone to share in an adventure!" The choice is the same:

- Stay in your ordinary, self-focused, small world, or
- Go on a journey to impact the larger world.

Although the traditional guiding sage may be an older man, there are many variations. Researchers explain,

> "Heroes cannot triumph over these obstacles without help from others. [Joseph] Campbell calls these helpers *mentors*, who bear a resemblance to the Jungian archetype of the *wise old man*. These [monomyth] mentors can be friends, teachers, love interests, sidekicks, or father figures." [6]

They can even be female lions. In *The Lion King*, Simba is living in his small, self-focused world. This is the "Hakuna Matata" realm of Timon and Pumbaa. Then the lioness Nala challenges him to leave behind that world:

> NALA: We really needed you at home.
>
> SIMBA: No one needs me.
>
> NALA: Yes, we do. You're the king.

The core elements are always present. But they can be shifted around. The original Harry Potter movie provides a twist. The challenge comes by direct mail. The acceptance letter to attend Hogwarts forces Harry to choose:

- Stay in your ordinary, self-focused, small world, or
- Go on a journey to impact the larger world.

[6] Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., & Kramers, R. M. (2017). Setting the scene: The rise of heroism science. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 1-16). Routledge. p. 3.

In another twist, the challenge comes from two sages. The names of both Professor Minerva McGonagall and Headmaster Albus Dumbledore appear on the letter. Both later serve as guides along the hero's journey.

The sage gets turned down

So, if you become an epic, Jedi-warrior-level fundraiser, you'll never have to hear "no" again, right? Wrong.

The hero refusing the call to adventure is *not* a violation of the story sequence. Quite the opposite: Refusing the call is part of the ancient narrative structure.

What happens when the actual Jedi warrior, Obi-Wan Kenobi, makes his appeal to Luke? Luke turns him down. Only later does he accept the call. How does Neo respond to Morpheus' first call to escape the ordinary world? Neo turns him down.[7] Only later does he take the red pill. When Nala appeals to Simba to leave behind his self-focused world, what happens? Simba turns her down. Only later does he accept the challenge. How does Bilbo react to Gandalf's initial challenge? Bilbo turns him down.[8]

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[7] When challenged by Morpheus to escape his normal world by climbing outside his office window, Neo's courage fails and he refuses.

[8] Bilbo responds to the call to adventure by saying, "We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures."

The point here is to understand that the refusal is not the *end* of the story. The refusal is a natural *part* of the story.[9] The hero refuses. But later, the hero accepts. When the refusal happens, the guiding sage does not disappear. The guiding sage persists.

Any number of factors can change the hero's mind. Maybe the hero's ordinary-world circumstances change. (This is Luke.) Maybe the sage returns with more convincing arguments. (This is Gandalf.) Maybe he returns with a final, last-chance request. (This is Morpheus.)

This standard sequence of refusing, then accepting, the call shows the lasting effects of the call to heroism. Even when it is refused, an epic challenge is powerful. It continues to work on the mind of the potential hero. The call to heroism taps into a deep-seated, universal, spiritual goal. But there's a catch. To have this effect, the challenge must be heroic.

The sage calls to heroism

The call to adventure must provide a challenge to be heroic. There can be no hero story without an epic challenge. When a fundraiser understands her role in this primal story, it should change how she[10] thinks about asking.

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[9] In *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone*, the refusal comes after accepting the initial challenge to attend Hogwarts. Harry says, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard," and also, "I can't be a wizard; I'm just Harry."

[10] As a convention for clarity and variety, throughout this series the donor/hero is referred to with "he/him/his" and the fundraiser/sage is

Does the sage challenge by apologetically asking small? Of course not. That's not the role! Failing to understand this ancient role leads to wrong actions. It leads to weak results.

If some fundraisers were playing the role of Gandalf the Grey, the story would be quite different. Why? Because they would shrink from challenging with *an epic* choice. Instead, they might meekly suggest to Bilbo,

> "I'm so sorry to inconvenience you. But might you consider a short walk outside the shire? I would really appreciate it. Any time you could spare would help."

No! No! No! That isn't the role. That won't accomplish anything in anyone's life. The role is to deliver the call to a heroic adventure. The donor hero can make a life-defining impact in the larger world. The donor hero can transform themselves and their world. But the hero needs a guiding sage who makes an epic call to adventure. The donor hero needs an epic fundraiser.

We can have fun with movie comparisons. But the underlying concept is serious. There is primal, hard-wired, operating software in humans that hungers for the hero's journey. That journey needs a

referred to with "she/her/hers." Of course, any role can be played by any gender.

guiding sage who challenges with a heroic choice. Heroism researchers explain,

> "Transforming mentorship is a pivotal component of the hero's journey." [11]

This is the role that the fundraiser can fill in the life story of the donor. This role is to challenge the potential hero to

- Step outside of his ordinary, self-focused, small world of earning and consuming, and
- Go on a journey to impact the larger world.

As a fundraiser, you're giving people the opportunity to be part of something bigger than themselves. Understanding your role in this primal narrative is key. It should change how you feel. It should change how you feel about apologetically asking small.[12] It should change how you feel about confidently asking big.

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[11] Allison, S.T., Goethals, G. R, & Kramers, R. M. (2017). Setting the scene: The rise of heroism science. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 1-16). Routledge. p. 3

[12] Some experimental evidence suggests that making a request apologetically may reduce giving. In an experiment where people experiencing homelessness sold candles from a nonprofit and kept half of the proceeds, the phrase "I'm sorry, would you please buy a Hope candle?" generated significantly lower likelihood of purchase than the phrase "Hope, Hope. Get a scented candle of Hope." Wei, C., Yu, Z., & Li, Y. (2021). Empathy impairs virtue: the influence of empathy and vulnerability on charitable giving. *Internet Research*. Study 1B. DOI 10.1108/INTR-07-2020-0407.

Another experiment tracked voluntary contributions for upkeep of a public restroom in Cologne, Germany. The share of people contributing was 66.6% when the sign read "Thank you very much for your contribution!" But this dropped to 56.6% (difference significant at p<.01) when the sign was changed to read, "Thank you very much for your contribution! We apologize for possible inconvenience due to construction works." Feldhaus, C., Sobotta, T.,

Dollars in the door

Fantasy hero stories are fun. Myth and psychology may be fascinating. But let's get real. How does this connect with actual dollars in the door? Consider this. Joshua Birkholz's team analyzed nearly 1,000 gift officers to learn what worked and what didn't. The familiar 80/20 rule appeared. The highest producing 20 percent of fundraisers brought in nearly 75 percent of the total dollars.

What was special about these high performers? One difference was stark. They almost always asked for *100 percent* of the donor's capacity rating. In comparison,

> "The bottom 80 percent tended to ask for about 40 percent of the capacity ratings."[13]

The high-performing fundraisers tended to talk in terms of,

> "How can we get the donor to give at their capacity?"[14]

& Werner, P. (2018). Reminders for voluntary payments might backfire – Evidence from a field study. *Economics Letters, 171*, 133-136.
Another study used machine learning to identify word clusters in a donation-based crowdfunding website. It found, "While a variety of topic words relating to factual details positively predicted the fundraising outcomes, clusters featuring the overuse of requesting words such as "help", "money", and "thank" seemed to backfire on the petitioners." Xu, L. Z. (2018). Will a digital camera cure your sick puppy? Modality and category effects in donation-based crowdfunding. *Telematics and Informatics, 35*(7), 1914-1924, 1922

[13] Birkholz, J. M. (2018, January). Planned giving fundraiser metrics. *Planned Giving Today,* 6-8. p. 7.

[14] Birkholz, J. M. (2018, Sept. 17). Identifying major gift donors. [Presentation]. *Practical Planned Giving Conference*, Orlando, Florida. The quotation marks

The lower-performing fundraisers tended to talk in terms of,

> "How much can we get away with asking them for? What's the safe request? What is a good number the donor would be comfortable with?"

Mindset matters. One group of fundraisers fulfilled the primal monomyth role. They acted as the sage who challenges with an epic choice. The other group did not.

In a hero story, the sage who challenges with a choice *always* asks to capacity. No epic story ever began by making a comfortable choice. Heroism isn't easy. If it were easy, it wouldn't be heroic. But the fundraiser who challenges with an epic choice is different. She can transform both the donor and the organization.

It's not just about the ask

Fulfilling this primal role in the donor-hero's story isn't simply a matter of adding zeros to an ask. The ask is only a single point in the journey. The relationship with the guiding sage is ongoing. It neither starts nor ends with the challenge.

The guiding sage knows the hero's origin story. The sage understands the hero's motivations. The

here do not necessarily reference direct quotes from the interviewed fundraisers or Birkholz, but rather are my example representations of the general character of the comments.

sage introduces the hero to friends and allies who will support the hero in the journey. The sage provides the hero with magical tools to help accomplish the quest. The sage is there before and after the hero accepts the challenge. The guiding sage helps the hero *start* and *finish* the hero's journey.

The guiding-sage fundraiser doesn't just make a better ask. She makes a better donor experience. She delivers real value. She finishes the story.

3

Beyond the Donor Hero:

Fundraising and Other Archetypal Characters

This series focuses on the "one big thing" in fundraising: Advance the donor's hero story. The hero is a compelling and important character. It is a universal, ancient pattern imprinted in humans. It is an archetype.

But the hero is not the *only* archetype. It's not the *only* character. Other archetypal characters can also be helpful in fundraising. They can provide alternative donor stories. They can even strengthen the donor-hero story.

The twelve archetypes

The twelve archetypes[1] are

[1] Although scholars differ somewhat in the number and labels of archetypes, variations of this particular list of twelve has been used extensively in marketing research, which is particularly relevant for fundraising applications. A detailed tracing of the lineage of each of these twelve archetypes through the works of C. G. Jung, Joseph Campbell, Dan MacAdams and others is presented in Faber, M. A., & Mayer, J. D. (2009). Resonance to archetypes in

1. Jester
2. Lover
3. Caregiver
4. Everyman
5. Innocent
6. Ruler
7. Sage
8. Magician
9. Hero
10. Creator
11. Explorer, and
12. Outlaw.

Each character is common in storytelling. People can usually identify with one or more of these characters.[2] This is important. A compelling story

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media: There's some accounting for taste. *Journal of Research in Personality, 43*(3), 307-322. This list of twelve archetypes was presented and discussed extensively in a practical marketing context in Mark, M. & Pearson, C. (2001). *The hero and the outlaw: Building extraordinary brands through the power of archetypes.* McGraw-Hill.

[2] In his book on marketing, Michel Jansen references this list. He explains that these twelve, "archetypes have a direct influence on people's behaviour. As noted, people are driven by ambitions and aspirations in the (collective) unconscious. As soon as they are recognised in a situation, they are activated because they are meaningful …. From here a meaningful relationship with the consumer can be developed, because the brand connects with the consumer at a deeper level… [These twelve] archetypes offer concrete bases for creating a unique, consistent and consequent identity and developing a meaningful relationship with the consumer." Jansen, M. (2006). *Brand prototyping: Developing meaningful brands.* Kluwer. p. 39. Thus, a focus on archetypal story character serves as a platform for fundraisers to access two powerful underlying giving motivations – identity and relationship.

requires identifying with a character. In fundraising, this turns *a* story into *the donor's* story.

However, this goes beyond just storytelling. These archetypal characters form narrative structures for personal identity. Different people identify with different characters. Often, they prefer characters whose orientation matches their own along two different axes:

- The freedom-order axis, and
- The ego-social axis.

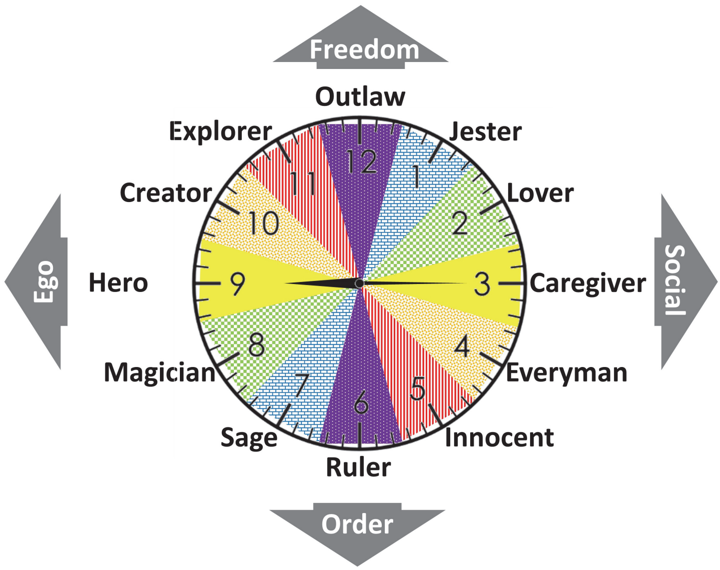
Each character matches with a location on these axes. Their numbers, 1 to 12, reflect this as hours on a clock.[3] On a clock face, the vertical axis is

[3] This axis alignment of the twelve archetypes was proposed by Jansen (2006). Mark and Pearson (2001) proposed a different circular alignment of the twelve archetypes using the axes of "Belonging-Independence" and "Mastery Stability." Bolhuis (2011) presented a circular alignment of the twelve archetypes using a three way axis excluding the fourth pole of "Ego." Van Nistelrooij (2013) also presented the same three-way axis, but shifted the location of Magician and Explorer as compared with Bolhuis (2011). Oosterhout (2013) used the same three-way axis, but changed the locations using unequal distributions of archetypes within categories. Van Hoolwerff (2014) presented a circular figure of the twelve archetypes similar to Bolhuis (2011) but with the "Freedom" axis relabeled as the "Creative" axis. Broek (2014) employed a different circular arrangement of the twelve archetypes using the three poles of power, freedom, and expressive. Another circular arrangement of twelve archetypes appeared in Pearson (1991) as the Heroic Myth Index. This is sometimes incorrectly attributed as the source for Jansen's (2006) popular circular image. Pearson's (1991) image shows a circular arrangement of twelve archetypes without any axes and differs from Jansen's (2006) by labeling Jester as Fool, Outlaw as Destroyer, Hero as Warrior, and Explorer as Seeker. Also, Everyman is absent and an additional character, Orphan is used.

Bolhuis, S. (2011). *Archetypen: onderzoek naar de visualisatie van archetypen met behulp van vormkenmerken.* [Master's thesis]. University of Twente.

Hoolwerff, D. (2014). *Does your mascot match your brand's personality? An empirical study on how visual characteristics of a brand mascot can function as*

the freedom-order axis. Up is towards freedom. Down is towards order. The horizontal axis is the ego-social axis. Left is towards ego. Right is towards social.



4

a tool for transmitting an archetypical brand personality. [Master's thesis]. University of Twente.
Jansen, M. (2006). *Brand Prototyping: Developing meaningful brands.* Kluwer.
Pearson, C. S. (1991). *Awakening the heroes within: Twelve archetypes to help us find ourselves and transform our world*. HarperOne (Harper Collins).
Uit het Broek, N. (2014). *The visualization of archetypes through the use of colors in logos.* [Master's thesis]. University of Twente.
Van Nistelrooij, E. (2013). *Face it, your brand personality needs a logo.* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Twente, Enschede.
Oosterhout, L. (2013). *Word marks: a helpful tool to express your identity: an empirical study regarding fonts of word marks as a tool for transmitting an archetypal identity* [Master's thesis]. University of Twente.

4 This image was created using the same archetype titles and axis orientation as that presented in Jansen, M. (2006). *Brand prototyping: Developing meaningful brands.* Kluwer.

The philanthropic archetypes

How do these characters fit into a donation story? Any of the characters could help someone. Any could be, at least a little, charitable. But only two characters are philanthropic *by definition*. Only the Hero and the Caregiver are *defined by* good works.

The Innocent is good. But the goodness is based upon what is *not* done, rather than what is done. The Sage[5] is good. But the goodness is based upon *advising* to act. It's not based on actually *performing* the act. All others can perform bad acts without breaking character at all.

Border archetypes

The location on the two axes creates *border* archetypes. These complement each other. They fit together because they share similar axis orientations. Adding bordering character elements can enhance the central character. This can strengthen the story.

Consider the donor's hero story. The Hero borders the Creator and the Magician. Adding these bordering character elements can enhance the donor's hero story. A donor-hero character can also be a Creator-Hero. The donor creates a distinctive good work. It would not have existed without him. He brings it into being.

[5] This character is also known as the mentor.

The donor may also be a Magician-Hero. A gift can serve as

> "a kind of magic potion or magic wand that helps bring about the desired situation."[6]

A gift that transforms a situation or organization is magical. It matches this character. Michel Jansen explains,

> "Transformation is the key word for the Magician archetype."[7]

Leland Kaiser also touches on this magical element. He says,

> "I love philanthropy because it allows me to substitute realities."[8]

Adding border elements also strengthens the other philanthropic archetype. The Caregiver borders the Lover and the Everyman. The most inspirational Caregiver is the *loving* Caregiver. Adding Everyman elements also enhances the Caregiver story. The Caregiver helps because it's what we all should do to support our shared community and values.

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[6] Jansen, M. (2006). *Brand Prototyping: Developing meaningful brands.* Kluwer. p. 64.

[7] *Id.*

[8] Leland R. Kaiser, Ph.D., quoted in Ahern, T. & Joyaux, S. (2008). *Keep your donors*. John Wiley & Sons. p. 18.

Shadow archetypes

The archetypal circle also reveals the shadow archetypes.[9] These reside opposite each other on the circle. They're focused on the same issue, but they have an opposite orientation.

Opposite the Ruler is the Outlaw. Both are focused on law, but they differ along the freedom-order axis. The Outlaw represents more freedom. The Ruler represents more order. Focus on personal experiences shadows in the Explorer (more freedom and ego) and the Innocent (more order and social). Enchantment can come from a Lover (more freedom and social) or a Magician (more ego and order). Focus on talking shadows in the Sage (more order and ego) and the Jester (more freedom and social). Focus on work can build something new, individual, and unique (the Creator/Artist). Or, it can solidify something established, shared, and common (the Everyman/Worker).[10]

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[9] In the original Jungian context the term "shadow" refers to an inverse reflection of the ego, rather than as it is used here in reference to pairs of inverse archetypal characters. Even in its original usage, "shadow" need not refer to a negative characteristic. It references any inverse reflection of the ego, whether positive or negative. Murray Stein points to, "…those who have formed a negative identity. The black sheep who are proud of their greed and aggressiveness and flaunt such traits in public while in their hidden shadow side they are sensitive and sentimental." Stein, M. (1998*). Jung's map of the soul*. Open Court. Chapter 5 (unpaginated).

[10] The Everyman and Creator shadow requires a bit more explanation. The Everyman is the practical, regular guy/gal, worker, or common man. Everyman goals are to belong or fit in to the group. Everyman fears are standing out or seeming to put on airs. See Mark & Pearson (2001), p. 166. The Everyman is high in order and social orientation. In contrast, the Creator is an artist, focused on creativity, originality, and intuition. The Creator is high in freedom and ego orientation. Michel Jansen explains, "Aspects such as creativity, originality, and intuition play an important role in this archetype."

The final shadow pair are the two philanthropic archetypes. Both the Hero and the Caregiver focus on helping others. The Hero is a sacrificial protector of group members or values. So is the Caregiver. But these characters differ sharply. They are opposites on the ego-social axis.

The conflict of philanthropic archetypes

Does a donor strongly resist the hero story? This might reflect attraction to the shadow archetype. Resistance to the Donor-Hero matches attraction to the Donor-Caregiver. If the Caregiver archetype feels natural, the Hero will feel too egocentric. The hero is at the wrong location on the ego-social axis.

This ego-orientation conflicts with the Caregiver archetype. It also conflicts with the Lover-Caregiver and Everyman-Caregiver. This creates emotional resistance. For example,

- Heroism can feel too focused on the self. It's not mainly about expressing emotional concern for others. (This violates the Caregiver character).
- Heroism can make the donor stand out. It's not what typical people do. (This violates the Everyman-Caregiver character.)
- Heroism can be too focused on projects and creations. It's not just about love and

Jansen, M. (2006). *Brand prototyping: Developing meaningful brands.* Kluwer. p. 60.

relationships. (This violates the Lover-Caregiver character.)

Dropping the hero story

One approach to this conflict is easy. Just use the donor's preferred character. If the donor is naturally drawn to the Caregiver story, use it. For example,

- The gift provides a small help to those in need. This matches the Caregiver.
- The gift is what we all should do to support our shared community. This matches the Everyman-Caregiver.
- The gift shows love to the recipients. This matches the Lover-Caregiver.

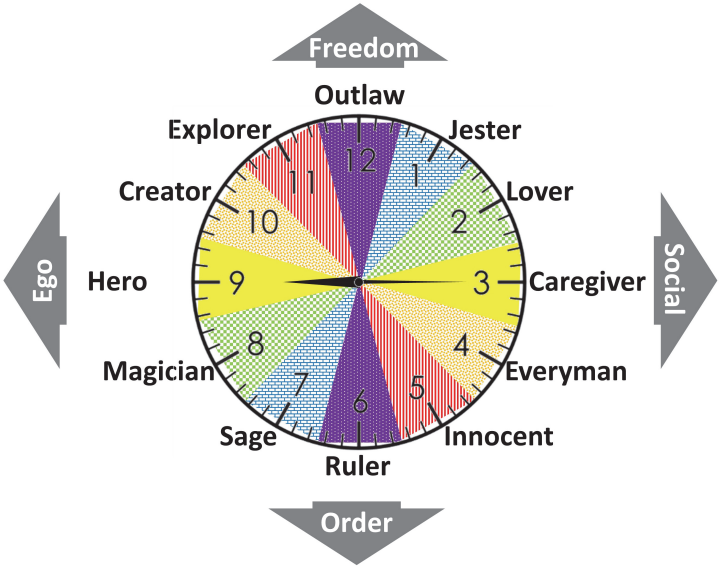
This works. But there is a problem. The Caregiver story does encourage giving. But it encourages small, widely dispersed gifts. The Caregiver ideal is doing a little bit of good in a lot of different places. It inspires the scattered light of a lamp that brightens a room. But it does not inspire the focused light of a laser that cuts through steel.

If we want donors to make regular, small, scattered gifts in response to regular, small, scattered appeals, then the Caregiver story works. But if we want to move the donor to make a major, focused, transformational gift, the story doesn't match. For those gifts, we must look to the Hero. We must advance the donor's hero story.

But the story must match the donor. By itself, a hero story may not fit. It may conflict with the donor's ego-social orientation. But there is a solution. A hero story can be reframed. It can be reshaped to match the donor's orientation. It can be custom made to fit the donor. The next chapter looks at this.

4

WOMEN, WEALTH, AND REFRAMING THE DONOR-HERO STORY



Reframing the hero story

The Hero is a high-ego character. It is at one extreme of the ego-social axis. For those at the

opposite end, the character may not fit. It may not feel comfortable. For them, *advancing* the donor-hero story requires first *reframing* it. This is achievable. The hero story can be made acceptable for a low-ego, high-social orientation.

The Hero is in the spotlight. He is often a public figure. He is observed and praised by others. For those on the ego side of the ego-social axis, this is great.[1] Such public recognition is welcome.

What about those at the extreme pole away from ego? They may resist individual notoriety. For them, the other philanthropic archetype is easier. The quiet, hidden Caregiver is safer.

But this story encourages small, dispersed giving. Only the Hero archetype matches large, focused, transformational gifts. But how can the Hero's public recognition be made acceptable? Let's look at three strategies.

Reframing: The heroic community

The Everyman-Caregiver resists personal fame. The Everyman fears standing out or seeming to put on airs,[2] but he embraces the virtues of the community. Thus, the *community* of donors can be heroic. The

[1] Publicity will be particularly attractive to those with this natural orientation. *See, e.g.,* Cox, J., Nguyen, T., Thorpe, A., Ishizaka, A., Chakhar, S., & Meech, L. (2018). Being seen to care: The relationship between self-presentation and contributions to online pro-social crowdfunding campaigns. *Computers in Human Behavior, 83*, 45-55.

[2] Mark, M. & Pearson, C. (2001). *The hero and the outlaw: Building extraordinary brands through the power of archetypes*. McGraw-Hill. p. 166

donor community may be praised, recognized, and honored.

This community is part of the donor's identity. It's part of the donor's self. And it's heroic. So, this is still the donor's hero story. But the heroism is reframed. It feels less egoistic. It feels more social. It matches the donor's orientation.

This is still a hero story. It's still a hero story *about* the donor. But the donor is not portrayed as *separately* heroic. The donor is part of a *community* of heroic supporters.

Reframing: The heroic loved one

The Lover-Caregiver resists personal fame but can embrace honor for a loved one. The donor may not want a building or scholarship fund named for him. That's egotistical. But naming it after a family member is different.[3] This gives honor to another person. That's less egotistical.[4]

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[3] In experiments, this is most powerful with a deceased female ascendant (mother, grandmother, aunt). See James, R. N., III. (2015). The family tribute in charitable bequest giving: An experimental test of the effect of reminders on giving intentions. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 26*(1), 73-89.

[4] One study found this effect when giving honor to a corporate sponsor. A phone app allowed people to raise money for charity by running or biking. It encouraged users to share auto-generated twitter posts in the form "I biked 19.251 @CharityMiles for @EveryMomCounts." A policy change then added to this auto generated form the identity of the corporate sponsors, e.g., "Thx2 @GNC for sponsoring me!" This change dramatically increased the number of "Likes" on Twitter. Researchers copied these two types of tweets in an experiment. When the tweet thanked a sponsor, people found the poster to be less "self-promoting" and more likeable.
Tan, J., Yan, L. L., & Pedraza-Martinez, A. (2020, January). *How to share prosocial behavior without being considered a braggart?* In Proceedings of the

Nevertheless, the person being honored *is part of* the donor's identity. The loved one *is part of* the donor's story. They may even share a family name. So, this is still *the donor's* hero story. This part of the donor's identity, or self, is being honored. But because the heroism is first reframed, it fits. It feels less egoistic. It feels more social. It matches the donor's orientation.

This fits a memorial or tribute gift. This can also work when naming for the "_____ family." The donor is honored, but only as part of a group of loved ones. Group recognition fits the Everyman-Caregiver. Family or "loved one" recognition fits the Lover-Caregiver.

Reframing: The heroic sacrifice

But what if we want to personally recognize just the donor? Caregiver donors will naturally resist. But even this can be reframed. For example,

> "I know you aren't wanting recognition. But if we could share your story in this way, it would set a powerful example. I know it makes you uncomfortable. But allowing us to do this would be like a second gift to [the charity]. It could really inspire others to give. It could make a big difference."

53rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 3941-3950.
https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/64224/0389.pdf

The recognition is personal. But now the motivation has changed. The story is not about ego. It's about sacrificing to help the cause. It's a story that matches the donor's orientation.

Advancing the reframed hero story

Even for the low-ego/high-social donor, heroism is still powerfully attractive. The hero is still a universal archetype. But matching the donor's natural orientation requires reframing. The story is translated. But it's still a hero story.

Of course, using a Caregiver story for these donors is easier. No reframing is needed. But this has its limits. The Caregiver fits with small, scattered, emotional-impulse gifts. Large transformational gifts need a hero story. Reframing helps the heroic gift match the donor's personality.

Gender stories

The right framing depends on the individual donor. It depends on the donor's archetype orientation. However, gender and class issues may influence this. For example, positive female characters were traditionally restricted. Men could be admirable Heroes, Rulers, Jesters, Explorers, and Outlaws. But not women. Women were restricted to the social/order characters. These are Caregiver, Lover, Everyman, and Innocent.

In the Caregiver story, gifts are small, dispersed acts of kindness. Such gifts may also be

expressions of love. This is the Lover-Caregiver story. Or they may show connection to the shared group. This is the Everyman-Caregiver story. Giving can also express faith and trust. This is the Innocent story.

These stories share a common theme. A small gift means just as much as a large one. These gifts could make some impact, but impact isn't really the point. The point is to express love, solidarity, or trust. These stories fit small, regular, dispersed giving. But they don't fit with a large, focused, transformational gift. That gift is the gift of the hero story.

Gender statistics

Gender differences in giving match these traditional stories. Women are more likely to make many small gifts to a wider variety of charities. This is true in current giving.[5] It's true in estate giving.[6] This matches the Caregiver story.

Men are more likely to make fewer, but larger, gifts. They're more likely to focus on one specific cause or organization. This matches the Hero story.

[5] For U.S. data see Andreoni, J., Brown, E., & Rischall, I. (2003). Charitable giving by married couples: Who decides and why does it matter? *Journal of Human Resources, 38*(1), 111-133. For UK data see Piper, G., & Schnepf, S. V. (2008). Gender differences in charitable giving in Great Britain. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 19*(2), 103-124.

[6] James, R. N., III. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning and Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285

However, this traditional gender difference may be changing. For example, a private foundation is a high-ego gift. Typically, the foundation lives forever and is

- Named for the donor
- Controlled by the donor, and
- Required to follow the donor's rules forever.

For years, estate gifts to private foundations were dominated by men. However, women's use of private foundations has increased dramatically. In the most recent years, this gender difference has disappeared.[7]

Wealth

The individual hero story may be naturally attractive to those with greater wealth. For others, it may require reframing. One study illustrated this. Some people received this request.[8]

> "Sometimes, one person needs to come forward and take individual action. This is one of those times. Take individual action. Donate today."

Others received this version:

> "Sometimes, one community needs to come forward and support a common goal. This is

[7] *Id.* p. 264.

[8] Whillans, A. V., Caruso, E. M., & Dunn, E. W. (2017). Both selfishness and selflessness start with the self: How wealth shapes responses to charitable appeals. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 70*, 242-250.

one of those times. Join your community. Donate today."

Which worked better? It depended. It depended on wealth. For wealthy donors, the high-ego, individual-focused heroic message worked better. For those with lower wealth, the high-social, community-focused heroic message worked better.

Major gifts are gifts from wealth holders. Wealth holders are used to controlling an outcome. They're used to making an impact. The individual hero story is a natural fit. Effective major gift messages can differ from small gifts messages. The donor's hero story matches the major donation.

Start with natural archetypes

The goal is to *advance* the donor's hero story. This is different from *creating* the donor's hero story. *Advancing* starts wherever the donor is right now. If a person identifies with a particular archetype, advancing starts with that archetype. But it doesn't stop there.

Effective fundraising then combines it with a philanthropic archetype. For smaller donations, it's combined with the Caregiver archetype. For larger donations, it's combined with the Hero archetype.

Any personality can fit with some version of the hero story. Professor Lawrence Walker explains,

> "Heroism is not characterized by a single personality profile; rather multiple types of personality profiles were found to be associated with heroism with the dynamic interplay between situational and personological variables being implicated."[9]

The "personological variables" differ with each donor. These reflect the donor's natural orientation. The fundraiser's role is to create matching "situational variables."

The fundraiser creates a compelling giving opportunity. This allows the donor's latent heroism to emerge. The fundraiser is the sage who guides the donor through the hero's journey.

Hero-archetype combinations

Any archetype can be combined with the donor hero.[10] The bordering archetypes are an easy fit. The Creator-Hero brings into being a new project. He helps design it. He helps create it. Entrepreneurs are natural creators. They love the personal involvement

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[9] Walker, L. J. (2017). The moral character of heroes. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 99-119). Routledge. p. 115.

[10] This matches the approach advocated by Pearson (1991). She also uses a circular arrangement of twelve archetypes but replaces the Hero character with the Warrior character. She excludes the Hero character because, "All twelve archetypes are important to the heroic journey, and to the individuation process." Pearson, C. S. (1991). *Awakening the heroes within: Twelve archetypes to help us find ourselves and transform our world*. HarperOne (Harper Collins). p. 7

Thus each of the twelve archetypes are simply alternative ways of telling a hero story. In the fundraising context, this means each are alternative ways of telling a donor-hero story.

of such hands-on philanthropy. The Magician-Hero uses philanthropy to magically transform reality. The impact should create awe and wonder.

Making the Hero story fit with the Caregiver archetype requires managing the ego-social conflict. The same strategy helps the Caregiver's border archetypes fit with the Hero story. Thus, the Everyman-Hero and Lover-Hero become possible.

Other combinations can also work. These are closer to the Hero archetype on the axes, so these can be even easier. For example,

- The Ruler-Hero

  This fits the board member donor receiving position and authority.

- The Outlaw-Hero

  This fits the social change donor railing against the system.

- The Explorer-Hero

  This fits the donor giving for innovative research.

- The Sage-Hero

  This fits the donor giving for education or religious teaching.

- The Innocent-Hero

  This fits the donor giving from blind trust or faithful obedience.

- The Jester-Hero

  This fits the ice bucket challenge or "Movember" campaign donor.[11]

The point is not just to match the natural archetype. The point is to start there and then move to the hero story. But the starting point helps guide the relevant messages. Detailed accounting fits the Sage-Hero. But it's needless for the Innocent-Hero. Outrage against the system matches the Outlaw-Hero. But it wouldn't match a Jester-Hero.

The organization archetype

Each archetype can be a starting point. It makes a particular flavor of hero story. This applies to the donor's natural archetype. But it also applies to the charity.

Each organization will likely fit a natural archetype. A charity might focus on social change, discovery, wisdom, art/creation, suffering, or community building. Each has its own natural archetype. Social change matches the Outlaw. Discovery matches the Explorer. Wisdom matches the Sage. Art and creation match the Creator/Artist.

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[11] However, the jester is a problematic charitable character. For example, if volunteers' related social media posts include humorous facial expressions, rather than serious or smiling ones, others view the volunteers as being less sincere in their support of the organization and are also less supportive of the organization themselves. Daniels, M., Kristofferson, K., & Morales, A. (2018). I'm just trying to help: How volunteers' social media posts alter support for charitable organizations. *ACR North American Advances*. https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v46/acr_vol46_2412150.pdf

Easing suffering matches the Caregiver. Building community matches the Everyman.

This organizational identity can help. It will naturally attract donors with a similar orientation. This creates a competitive advantage in fundraising.[12] But this natural advantage won't lead to major gifts by itself. It does so only when this identity is converted into a related *donor-hero story*. Fortunately, this is always possible. For every archetype, there's a hero story for that.

Summary

The hero is not the only archetypal character. However, among the twelve archetypal characters only two are inherently philanthropic. The Caregiver encourages small, dispersed, regular giving. The Hero matches large, focused, transformational giving. Major gifts fundraising must advance the donor's hero story.

However, not every donor will naturally identify with the hero. Resistance may come from gender roles, class, or just individual personality. Other characters may match better.

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[12] For a comparable concept, *see* Chapman, C. M., Louis, W. R., & Masser, B. M. (2018). Identifying (our) donors: Toward a social psychological understanding of charity selection in Australia. *Psychology & Marketing,* 35(12), 980-989. p. 986. ("First, identity research will help fundraisers understand which identities a particular type of charity should make salient in campaign materials to uplift response rates.")

The effective fundraiser starts with this natural orientation but doesn't let the story stop there. The fundraiser moves this natural story into a hero story. Sometimes this means reframing the hero story. This requires wisdom. This requires a sage who guides the donor through the hero's journey.

The lurking enemy

The donor's hero story works. It's primal. It's powerful. It can match any donor. It can match any organization. It can be transformational. But there is an enemy.

There's an enemy that battles against the donor's hero story. It's just as primal. It's just as powerful. It's primal and powerful because it, too, is a hero story. It is another face of the monomyth.

But it's a story that belittles the donor. It's a story that disparages fundraising and discourages the fundraiser. And if you're like many fundraisers, it's the story that dominates your organization. The next chapter looks at this competing hero story.

5

THE FUNDRAISING CURSE OF THE ADMINISTRATOR-HERO STORY

Philanthropy is powerful. It can do more for the donor than just consuming more stuff would do. It can provide personally meaningful impact. It can enhance the donor's identity. It can advance the donor's hero story. This series explores the steps for advancing that story. But for many charities, those steps don't matter.

The lure of the administrator-hero story

The steps don't matter because the charity doesn't care about *the donor's* hero story. Fundraisers aren't even allowed to *tell* the donor's hero story. Why? Because it lowers the status of the charity administrator. It conflicts with the administrator-hero story.

For the administrator, the donor's hero story is offensive. So, it's forbidden. This resistance is not trivial. It's fundamental. It's primal.

The desire for heroism is universal. The most compelling story for me is *my* hero story. The most compelling story for you is *your* hero story. The most compelling story for donors is *their* hero story. For the nonprofit administrator, the compelling story is the *administrator* hero story.[1]

Fundraising with the administrator-hero story

Fundraising messages in the administrator-hero story may vary. But it will be some form of the following:

> "Look at how wonderful our organization is. Look at the many great things we are doing. We are worthy. We are inspirational. We are heroes. Give to us."

What is the core message for donors? Alan Clayton describes it succinctly:

> "Hello. I'm Alan. I'm great. Can I have some money, please?"[2]

[1] For research on the phenomenon of characterizing administrators as heroes in an administrator-hero story, *see*,
Bellavita, C. B. (1991). The public administrator as hero. *Administration & Society, 23*(2), 155-185; Hubbell, L. (1990). The relevance of the heroic myths to public servants. *The American Review of Public Administration, 20*(3), 139-154; Learmonth, M. (2001). NHS trust chief executives as heroes? *Health Care Analysis, 9*(4), 417-436. In fundraising literature, *see* Portnoy, D. (2012). *The non-profit narrative: How telling stories can change the world.* PMG Press.

[2] Personal notes from presentation. Clayton, A. (2019, February 27). A new ambition. *Fundraising Institute of Australia Conference*, Melbourne, Australia.

Understandably, the donor response to such messages is weak. In this view, the donor is certainly not the hero. At best, the donor is just an ATM.

And the fundraiser? The fundraiser is the stick used to whack the ATM. Fundraising is dirty business. It's unpleasant work. But alas, it must be tolerated. We must allow it so the real heroes – the administrators – can continue their heroic work.

This administrator-hero story usually falls flat for donors. But it's compelling for administrators. In truth, most nonprofit administrators are not just *normally* attracted to their hero story. They are *extraordinarily* attracted to their hero story.

These are people who willingly accept lower pay. They live in smaller houses. They drive older cars. They endure all this so that they can do work with meaning. They do this so that they can be part of a hero story. Their hero story. The administrator-hero story.

The competitive problem of the administrator-hero story

Fundraising with the administrator-hero story is hard. It's hard because it's based on a false assumption. The assumption is this:

> *Donations will result simply from proving the organization's greatness.*

Even if this were true, it wouldn't help. First, there's a logic problem. Suppose donors gave simply to an organization's greatness. Then, logically, they should give only to the greatest organization. Before donating, they should determine,

- Is this the *greatest* charity on the planet?
- Are there none that are *more* financially efficient?
- Are there none that help those in *greater* need?
- Are there none that make a more lasting impact?

Competing on organizational greatness means competing in an infinitely crowded field. In the U.S., there are over a million nonprofits. Most are pitching and promoting to draw attention to their greatness. Good luck proving that *your* organization ranks first out of a million.

But don't worry. Even if you did, it wouldn't actually help. It wouldn't help because the assumption is false. People don't give to organizational greatness by itself.

The donor's impact

Charity managers often misunderstand philanthropy. They think that giving is motivated by *organizational* impact. It's not. Giving is motivated by *the donor's* impact. Donors care about *their* impact because they care about *their* hero story.

If the donor's gift doesn't make an impact, then why give? Removing the donor's heroism removes the donor's motivation.

Defending the administrator-hero story

It's not that the administrator-hero story isn't logical. It can be. In fact, it can be more logical than the donor-hero story.

Administrators spend their lives focused on these problems. They know the complexities. They are the experts. According to some, donors should,

> "cut an unrestricted check … and get out of the way."[3]

Or more forcefully,

> "Fund people to do stuff and get the hell out of their way."[4]

Administrators love these messages. Nonprofit management books – sold to nonprofit administrators – repeat these cherished ideas. One popular management book explains,

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[3] Le, V. (2019, February 18). Sometimes the best thing we donors can do to advance social justice is to just write the check and get out of the way. [Blog post]. *NonprofitAF*, https://nonprofitaf.com/2019/02/sometimes-the-best-thing-we-donors-can-do-to-advance-social-justice-is-to-just-write-the-check-and-get-out-of-the-way/

[4] Devlin-Foltz, D. (March 27, 2015). FPTDSAGTHOOTW as a battle cry. [Blog post]. *The Aspen Institute*. https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/fptdsagthootw-battle-cry/

> "The best thing supporters can do is to give resources that enable the institution's leaders to do their work the best way they know how. Get out of their way, and let them build."[5]

In this world of the administrator-hero story, people are supposed to give to administrative efficiency. Once administrative efficiency is achieved, fundraising should be easy. In this world, fundraising is

> "creating a constituency which supports the organization because it deserves it."[6]

The messaging problem of the administrator-hero story

This administrator-hero story is logical. It is reasonable. And for fundraising *it is deadly*.

Consider these messages from a donor's perspective:

> "Give me your money because I deserve it."

Or even worse,

> "I know better than you how to spend your money. So, give me your money then keep your mouth shut. I am the expert here."

The problem isn't that the administrator-hero story is false. The charity managers might "deserve"

[5] Collins, J. (2005). *Good to great and the social sectors.* HarperCollins. p. 24.
[6] Drucker, P. (1990). *Managing the nonprofit organization.* HarperCollins. p. 56

the money. They might be the experts. The problem is these messages *don't work*. By themselves, they don't encourage giving.

The path of the administrator-hero story

What is the typical experience for charities that fundraise with the administrator-hero story? These messages will create a few "pat-on-the-head" gifts. They'll get an "isn't-that-nice" comment. They'll earn a word of encouragement: "You people" do such good work.

But for some reason, the donors don't seem to get "engaged." So, the organization spends time and effort to "engage" the donors. It communicates the administrator-hero story in tweets, posts, and newsletters. It shares the administrator-hero story at banquets, on the phone, and in personal visits. And still, the gifts are small. The retention is poor. The revenue is flat.

Administrators read of major, transformational gifts at other organizations. They think again of their administrator-hero story. The story feels compelling – to the administrators. The story feels sound – to the administrators.

Why, then, aren't they getting these transformational gifts? It must be that they aren't reaching the right audience. They decide they need to take their administrator-hero story to new people. New donors. New *wealthy* donors! So, despite poor

retention rates for current donors, they pursue the magic elixir of new donors. But such efforts are even more expensive. The rewards are even more modest.

A few bright spots remain. Some large gifts still happen. These come from board members. These donors actually *control* the organization. These donors *are* charity managers. For them, the administrator-hero story *is* the donor-hero story.

The worldview problem

The problem here is not effort. The problem is not commitment. It's not technique or "best" practices. The problem is deeper. The problem is an underlying conflict of worldviews.

The most powerful experience fundraising can offer is to advance the donor's hero story. Living the donor-hero story provides a transformational experience. It touches the essence of the donor's being. It shapes the donor's identity. It is why major contributors often express gratitude for taking part in the donation experience. But we cannot offer that experience without answering the central question: Who is the hero?

The competitive advantage of the donor's hero story

Advancing the donor's hero story changes the competitive landscape. Other charities may be great. They may be telling great stories. But it doesn't

matter because they aren't telling *the donor's* story. No story is more powerful than the donor's story.

Think about your alma mater. Suppose I proved that a rival school was 10% more efficient. According to the logic of organizational greatness, you would immediately switch your donations. But you won't. Why not? You won't because the rival school isn't part of *your* story. What the other school is doing is fine. It's nice. But it's not *your* story. And it won't get *your* donations.

The donor's impact

It's not that donors aren't motivated by impact. It's that donors are motivated by *their* impact in *their* story. Administrative efficiency can be important. But it's important only when it advances *the donor's* hero story.

The *charity* impact story is nice. Did the charity help 10,000 people last year? Congratulations. The administrators are heroes. But that doesn't tell the donor what *his* gift would do today. The donor's gift must create change. Otherwise, why would he make it?

Having helped others in the past is great. But the donor's gift is about reaching the one who *hasn't yet* been helped. It's about the donor's impact. It's not about what the charity has already done. It's about what the charity hasn't done.

Conclusion

Advancing the donor's hero story is powerful. It's compelling. It provides deep value and meaning. It works. The administrator-hero story is also powerful, but only for the administrators.

In the donor's hero story, the charity and its administrators are not the hero. But don't worry. The organization does play a vital role in the donor's hero story. What is this role? The next chapter looks at this question.

6

THE NONPROFIT IN THE DONOR'S HERO STORY: THE HAMMER OF THOR

Who is the hero?

Is the donor the hero of our fundraising story? If not, then we may not be

- Telling the donor's story
- Talking about the donor's impact, or
- Deeply connecting the donor to the cause.

Advancing the donor's hero story is effective. It makes a compelling fundraising story. But wait. Isn't the charity important? What about its expertise and infrastructure? What about its history and goals?

Role change

The charity and its administrators are still essential. Just because the charity isn't the hero, doesn't mean it isn't part of the story.

But when we drop the administrator-hero story, there's a difference. The organization story stops *competing* with the donor's hero story. Instead, it starts *supporting* the donor's hero story. The charity becomes important *as a means of advancing* the donor's hero story. It becomes the hero's magical instrument for impact. It becomes the hero's weapon.

The hammer of Thor

When I was a kid, I loved comic books. My friends and I studied the latest issues. We traded tattered copies. What we loved most was arguing. Mostly, we argued about which superhero would win in fight.

One of my favorites was Thor. When Thor had his enchanted hammer, he was powerful. He could control lightening and weather. He could fly. He could really make an impact! Without his hammer, Thor wasn't very effective as a hero.[1] The hammer of Thor was a key part of the story.[2]

[1] For this story line, *see* Branagh, K. (Director). (2011). *Thor*. [Film]. Marvel Studios.

[2] Real fanboys or fangirls will know that Thor's hammer actually had a name. From the original Norse myth, it was called Mjölnir.

The hammer is not the hero

Thor's hammer is powerful. But what does it do without Thor? Nothing. Thor's hammer is cool. But nobody ever cheered for the hammer to win. The hammer isn't the hero.

In the hands of the heroic donor, the effective nonprofit can be a powerful hammer. With the right hammer, the donor can make a massive impact. The hammer is important. But the hammer isn't the hero.

The hero's journey

In Joseph Campbell's monomyth, the hero takes a journey. The hero's journey begins when the hero is forced to make a choice. The hero leaves his ordinary, self-focused world. He embarks on an adventure to impact the larger world. Often a guiding sage delivers this call to adventure.

But the guiding sage role continues after the call to adventure. The guiding sage provides help, advice, and direction along the journey. This ongoing role is also common in hero movies. Consider

- Obi-Wan Kenobi (original *Star Wars*)
- Morpheus (*The Matrix*), or
- Gandalf the Grey (*The Hobbit*).

These guiding sages forced a choice to start the adventure. But they also helped along the way.

The guiding sage provides the hero's weapon

The guiding sage can help in several ways. She may introduce the hero to friends and allies. Often, she gives a powerful instrument or weapon to the hero.[3]

Obi-Wan gives Luke a light saber. Gandalf shows Bilbo how to get the magical ring. Morpheus trains Neo to fight. Dumbledore gives Harry Potter an invisibility cloak. These tools aren't just for fun. They help the hero complete the journey. They empower the hero. They magnify the hero's impact.

The instrument encourages the hero to make the journey. It makes the adventure feasible. Could I be an epic hero? I don't know. I'm a little unsure. But what if I had Luke Skywalker's light saber? What if I had Harry Potter's invisibility cloak? What if I had Thor's hammer? That changes things! The powerful instrument makes epic heroism more achievable.

The fundraiser as monomyth guiding sage

The effective fundraiser plays an archetypal role in the donor's hero story. This role is the guiding sage. It's the sage who challenges with a choice. The fundraiser

[3] "Unleashing the heroic imagination involves fostering the development of new mental scripts and enhancing people's heroic self-efficacy." Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R, & Kramers, R. M. (2017). Setting the scene: The rise of heroism science. In S. Allison, G. Goethals, and R. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 1–16). Routledge. p. 4
As the "hammer of Thor," the organization fulfills this role of "enhancing people's heroic self-efficacy".

- Challenges the donor to look beyond the ordinary, self-focused world
- Calls the donor-hero to impact the larger world
- Advises and guides the donor during the heroic journey, and
- Provides powerful instruments that help the donor complete the journey.

Forging the donor-hero's weapon

What magical instruments can the fundraiser offer to the donor hero? Maybe it's an endowed scholarship fund. Maybe it's sponsorship of a child. Maybe it's a named room or building. Maybe it's digging a well. Maybe it's delivering a mosquito net.

These are all things that would be difficult for the donor to do alone. But the guiding-sage fundraiser provides the magical weapon. A proposal can fit the instrument to the needs of the donor's specific journey. The guiding sage selects the weapon to match the hero's journey.

The right-sized hammer

No weapon can fit every hero or every journey. If the hero can't lift the hammer, it can't be part of his story. On the other hand, Thor shouldn't be holding a tiny reflex hammer. That doesn't fit a heroic story either.

In 2015, John Paulson gave $400 million to Harvard's (renamed) John A. Paulson School of Engineering. If a donor wants to use $400 million to make an impact in engineering research and education, Harvard is the right-sized hammer. If he wants his story to live on with future generations of leading engineers, Harvard is the right-sized hammer. This weapon matches this hero and this hero's journey.

On the other hand, it would do no good to convince me to give $400 million to make this impact. It's a really nice hammer, but it's the wrong size. I can't lift that hammer. It can't be part of my hero story.

Suppose $50 provides mosquito nets to people in need. I can lift that hammer. But it might be the wrong size, too.[4] If I can lift it too easily, it's not that heroic. It's a cute hammer, but it's too small to really advance my hero story.

[4] The impact of this type of mismatch is shown in Lewis, J., & Small, D. (2018). Ineffective altruism: Giving less when donations do more. In A. Gershoff, R. Kozinets, and T. White (Eds.), *NA - Advances in Consumer Research* (Vol. 46). Association for Consumer Research. p. 194-198 https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v46/acr_vol46_2412099.pdf
See also, Lewis, J., & Small, D. (2019, June 4). *Ineffective altruism: Giving less when donations do more.* [Working paper]. SSRN. p. II. ("In four studies (N = 2,725), when we inform participants of the cost of a unit of impact (e.g. the cost of a mosquito net), they perversely donate less when the cost is cheaper. This result arises because people want their donation to have a tangible impact, and when the cost of such an impact is lower, people can achieve it with a smaller donation.")

The hammer is not the hero

In comics, the hammer increases the hero's impact. In fundraising, the nonprofit increases the donor's impact. The nonprofit is the donor's hammer. The fundraiser's goal is to get the hero to pick up the hammer and use it.

To accomplish this goal, it's fine to talk about how great the hammer is. But be careful. The goal is to sell the hammer *to* the hero. It's not to sell the hammer *as* the hero.

Talking about the wonderful charity is fine. But don't slide into telling the administrator-hero story. That's not the goal. The goal is to show how great the nonprofit is *as an instrument for the donor hero*. The message is,

> "Imagine the impact you could make with this great hammer. You could use it to accomplish a personally meaningful result."

The message is not,

> "Look at the great things this hammer has done. Don't you want to honor the hammer's greatness with a donation?"

Same facts, different stories

The administrator-hero story looks backward. It honors the past heroism of the charity and its administrators. The donor-hero story looks forward. It shows how the donor can accomplish new heroic

things. The charity can be a powerful weapon in the donor-hero's hands.

The charity appears in both stories. The facts can be the same, but the story is different. Suppose a charity has an impressive history. That fact can be part of either story.

- *Administrator-hero story*

  Look at our grand history and all that we have done. You should give us money because we are so great.

- *Donor-hero story*

  Look at what we have helped these heroic donors to accomplish in the past. You're just like them. We can help you make a lasting impact, too.

Both messages include details about the organization. Both share examples of past impact. But the stories are different. One tells an administrator-hero story. ("We are great. See all the great things we have done.") The other tells a donor-hero story. ("We are a great instrument for you to use. Other donors like you have used this instrument to accomplish great things.")

Same facts, different hero

The difference in these stories is not whether the charity is great. The difference is the hero. In the donor-hero story,

- The donor is the agent.
- The donor makes the impact.
- The donor uses the otherwise inert instrument, the charity, activated by his gift.
- The charity has a role, but the donor makes the decisions.

In the administrator-hero story,

- The charity is the agent.
- The charity makes the impact.
- The charity uses the otherwise inert instrument, the donor, activated by its inspirational mission and accomplishments.
- The donor has a role, but the administrators make the decisions.

Mission drift problem?

Won't advancing the donor's hero story send the organization off course? Doesn't helping donors prevent a narrow focus? No.

Let's return to the story. The charity is the magical instrument or weapon in the hero's journey. In popular movies, this might be Thor's hammer, Luke's light saber, or Harry Potter's invisible cloak.

But Thor's hammer is not a light saber. A light saber is not an invisible cloak. The instrument may be magical, but it does one thing, not everything. To be a powerful instrument for a donor hero, the charity

must be excellent. This excellence means doing a few things well.

Mission drift solution

If the instrument doesn't fit the hero's task, what does the guiding sage do? Does she try to change the instrument into something it's not? ("Yes, you need an invisibility cloak. But we can widen this hammer so you could hide behind it!") No. She points the hero to a different instrument.

The fundraiser points the donor to a different charity. She introduces a new mentor who knows that instrument. Of course, that's not what a "pushy salesperson" would do. And that's the point. The guiding sage plays a different role. The guiding sage *helps* the hero.

Advising against interest

Helping a donor in this way shatters stereotypes. A "pushy-salesperson" type would never connect a donor with a "competitor." Doing this might seem counterproductive. It's not. It establishes the fundraiser in the role of trusted advisor. Such authentic behavior transforms the donor-fundraiser relationship.

Of course, in the administrator-hero story, this is an act of heresy. The fundraiser's job isn't to help the donor. The fundraiser's job is to sell the administrator-hero story to the donor. The fundraiser is supposed to be the pushy salesperson.

But even from a purely financial perspective, this aggressive approach isn't the best. Establishing a guiding-sage relationship is like planting an almond. Over time, it can be nurtured into a tree that will produce a thousand-fold more. Forcibly selling the charity as the right tool even when it doesn't fit? That's like eating the almond instead of planting it.

The charity is still important

The charity plays an important role in the donor-hero story. It empowers the donor hero. It helps the donor hero accomplish his heroic goals. It serves as a powerful instrument for the hero.

Advancing the donor's hero story doesn't mean that the charity isn't important. It doesn't mean that the charity isn't great. It only means that the charity isn't the hero.

The facts about the organization are the same in both stories. But the story changes. The story is no longer,

> "Hello. We're great. Can we have some money please?"

Instead, the story becomes,

> "You can use this great instrument to make a personally meaningful impact. Pick it up! Use it to do great things!"

In fundraising, the right story – with the right hero – leads to the right results. However, there can be another barrier to the donor-hero story. Sometimes the problem isn't having the wrong hero. Sometimes the problem is having no hero at all.

Charity role: Strength or need?

There are many archetypal characters besides the hero. However, only two are definitionally philanthropic: The hero and the caretaker. In fundraising, either story can work. But each works for different gift sizes. The donor caretaker makes small, dispersed, caring gifts. The donor hero makes large, concentrated, transformational gifts.

In each story, the charity plays a different role. In the donor-hero story, the charity's role is one of strength. The charity is the donor-hero's powerful instrument.

In the donor-caretaker story, the charity's role is different:

- Charity strength can be a problem.

  Why would the charity hold wealth when there is immediate need? Why focus on the charity's long-term stability when others want help now?

- Instead, charity need can fit this story.

  The charity has a financial crisis. What happens? The sympathetic caretaker responds with a little help.

Experiment: Matching charity role (strength or need) with donor role (hero or caretaker)

The organization story can be one of need or strength. In either case, it should match the story archetype. One experiment tested this.[5] The fundraising message included a reference either to the charity's need or strength. The charity need message read,

> "A survey last year found that [this charity] received financial support from 5% of our local community. However, a recent survey last month shows that [this charity] is supported by ONLY 1% of our local community."[6]

The charity strength message replaced "ONLY 1%" with "OVER 10%." Which version worked better? It depended. One headline emphasized the donor-caretaker role. It read,

> "Be compassionate to those around you. Make a difference."[7]

With this headline, the charity need message ("ONLY 1%"), worked twice as well. Another headline emphasized the donor-hero role. It read,

[5] Septianto, F., & Tjiptono, F. (2019). The interactive effect of emotional appeals and past performance of a charity on the effectiveness of charitable advertising. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 50*, 189-198.

[6] *Id.* p. 192.
[7] *Id.*

> "Be proud of what you can do. Make a difference."[8]

With this headline, the charity strength message ("OVER 10%") worked twice as well. Matching the charity role (strength vs. need) with the donor role (proud hero vs. compassionate caretaker) worked.

Practice: Charity strength or charity need?

Yes, it's true. We can raise funds with an organizational need message. But this won't lead to large gifts. Why not? Because it uses the wrong archetype for large gifts. The donor caretaker makes small, dispersed, caring gifts. Only the donor hero makes large, concentrated, transformational gifts.

Charities can get stuck in the wrong story. This can create a nonprofit starvation cycle. Charities project organizational need because this matches the caretaker story. Charities then internalize this need-based "scarcity" mindset.[9] They avoid building long-term capacity. They avoid projecting financial strength.

Their next financial crisis triggers a few quick gifts. It works! But it "works" at the cost of future major investment gifts. This need-based "scarcity" mindset can lead to recurring organizational crisis.

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[8] *Id.*

[9] *See* Covey, S. R. (2004). *The 7 habits of highly effective people: Powerful lessons in personal change.* Simon and Schuster. (Discussing "scarcity mentality" and "abundance mentality.")

But there is another path. There is another story. The donor-hero story matches the strong, powerful nonprofit. The charity is the donor-hero's powerful weapon. In this story, the charity projects strength and abundance. This message supports major investment gifts.

This is not just about story or experiments. It's about real-world fundraising.[10] The largest donations go to the largest – often wealthiest – nonprofits. These are "strongest link" gifts.[11] These donors "give to the best."

Conclusion

Powerful fundraising starts with the right story. For major, transformational gifts, that story is the donor's hero story. The charity plays an essential role in that story. The charity is the donor's magical instrument or weapon. A donor hero wants the strongest, most effective weapon. That weapon helps him make the biggest impact. The charity is an

[10] For matching commentary from fundraisers on scarcity vs. abundance mindsets *see, e.g.,* Edgington, N. (2018, March 20). *Nonprofit scarcity thinking will get you nowhere.* [Blog]. https://www.socialvelocity.net/nonprofit-scarcity-thinking-will-get-you-nowhere/ ; Tomchin, A. (2019, September 19). Scarcity versus abundance mindset: Which one will lead your fundraising? [LinkedIn Article]. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/scarcity-versus-abundance-mindset-which-one-lead-your-amy-tomchin/ ; Wright, A. (2017, May 10). *3 tactics to shift your nonprofit from scarcity to abundance mindset.* [Blog]. https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/listicle/nonprofit-abundance-mindset/

[11] Birkholz, J. (2019, June). *Principal gifts.* [White paper]. BWF. https://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Principal-Gifts-by-Birkholz.pdf

essential part of this story. It's not the hero. It's the hero's hammer.

7

FUNDRAISER TURNOVER PROBLEMS: THE STIGMATIZED STORY CHARACTER

Good and bad stories

Stories are powerful. They can provide meaning and motivation. They can be a source of personal identity. For fundraising, stories are key. But there is a downside.

Inspirational stories can motivate. But stigmatized stories can cripple. This matters for fundraising because it matters for *fundraisers*. Few professions suffer more from stigmatized stories than fundraising.

Stigma and synonyms

Story begins with character. Consider the "fundraiser" character. What is this role? What is this title? Fundraiser. What does that mean? Fund means money. Raiser means one who retrieves or gets. So, a fundraiser is a "money getter."

Not very inspirational, is it? It doesn't distinguish the profession from other "money getters." A drug dealer is a money getter. So is a prostitute, a pickpocket, or a time-share telemarketer.

But "fundraiser" actually does imply more. It implies money getting by a specific method. How does a "fund" (money) "raiser" (getter) accomplish this money-getting? By asking. By asking based on need. By asking based on need without offering anything comparable in return.

What's another word for that? Begging. Thesaurus.com says to "seek charity" has these synonyms: Solicit charity, beg, hustle, cadge, chisel, freeload, mooch, sponge, and panhandle. (Do you sense any possible stigma in these synonyms?)

Stigma and technical definitions

Let's get technical. Social psychologists define stigmatized work. This means work has either a social or moral taint. Researchers explain,

"Social taint occurs … where the worker appears to have a servile relationship to others

> (e.g., shoe shiner, customer complaints clerk, butler, maid). Moral taint occurs where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility (e.g., bill collector, tabloid reporter, telemarketer …"[1]

How does this relate to fundraisers? Researchers investigated this by interviewing fundraisers. They found,

> "the work of fundraisers may be perceived as socially and morally tainted. Specifically, fundraisers may appear subservient to others through their position of being the one to ask others for money (social taint) and may endure societal perceptions that the modes by which they ask for money are morally suspect (moral taint)."[2]

Fundraisers can have both types of job stigma. Fundraiser can be a stigmatized role.[3]

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[1] Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 413-434. p. 415.

[2] Meisenbach, R. J., Rick, J. M., & Brandhorst, J. K. (2019). Managing occupational identity threats and job turnover: How former and current fundraisers manage moments of stigmatized identities. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 29*(3), 383-399. p. 385.

[3] "fundraising is still often viewed as a form of high-pressure salesmanship or even begging (Breeze and Scaife, 2015, p 571), 'rather squalid' (Allford, 1993, p 105) and 'an odious activity' (Bloland and Tempel, 2004, p 16), while fundraisers are viewed as 'hucksters' (Kelly, 1998, p 105), 'pushy and somewhat sleazy' Joyaux, 2011, pp 94-5) or even 'the white collar equivalent of cleaning toilets' (Pink, 2012, p 2)." Breeze, B. (2017). *The new fundraisers: Who organizes charitable giving in contemporary society?* Policy Press. p. 21. Citing to

Stigma and retention

Internal feelings of stigma can drive quitting. Research on employee retention confirms this. A belief that one's job is not viewed positively increases intentions to quit.[4] It also increases actually quitting.

Allford, M. (1993). *Charity appeals: The complete guide to success.* J.M. Dent & Sons.

Bloland, H. G., & Tempel, E. R. (2004). Measuring professionalism*. New Directions for Philanthropic Fundraising, 43*, p. 5-20.

Breeze, B. and Scaife, W. (2015). Encouraging generosity: The practice and organization of fund-raising across nations. In P. Wiepking and F. Handy (Eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Philanthropy.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Joyaux, S. P. (2011). *Strategic fund development: Building profitable relationships that last* (3rd ed.). Wiley.

Kelly, K. S. (1998). *Effective fundraising management*. Routledge.

Pink, D. H. (2012.) *To sell is human*. Canongate.

Such stigma is a problem even for the most eminent fundraisers. Naomi Levine is credited with overseeing the fundraising that brought NYU from near bankruptcy to the nation's first billion dollar campaign. In a profile of her career, *The Chronicle of Philanthropy* related

> "When Naomi Levine was making weekly visits in the 1980s to see her mother at a retirement home in the Bronx, she could count on getting a special request just before they encountered the other residents. "Now, look, Naomi," her mother would say, "if the ladies want to know what you do, say you are a lawyer, not a fund raiser."

Sommerfeld, M. (2002, August 8). The secrets of her success. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, https://www.philanthropy.com/article/The-Secrets-of-Her-Success/184479

Ken Burnett shares,

> "I used to respond confidently to the customary question, 'And what do you do?' with, 'I am a fundraiser. I raise money for charity.' In my naivete I expected to be met by enthusiastic acclaim, admiration, and expressions of interest. But instead people reacted as if I'd just announced myself to be a badger gasser or apprentice on a North Sea sludge dumper."

Burnett, K. (2002). *Relationship fundraising: A donor-based approach to the business of raising money* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass. p. 13-14

[4] Pinel, E. C., & Paulin, N. (2005). Stigma consciousness at work. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 27*(4), 345-352.

Stigma drives quitting because it impairs feelings of self-worth.[5] This is a special concern for expanding diversity in fundraising.[6] An occupational stigma is difficult for anyone. No one wants to feel they are "appearing subservient" by asking for money. But this can be particularly painful if it reinforces stereotypes.

We have a problem

Why do people start a stigmatized role? In a national survey, 44% of fundraisers reported starting because either

- They felt they had no other good opportunities, or
- They thought they were hired to do something else.[7]

How do people respond to a stigmatized role? They don't want to play it. Even if they start, they don't play it for long. What is the average time a new fundraiser stays in the job? 16 months.[8] Half of all development directors anticipate leaving in 2 years or less.[9] They aren't just switching charities. At small

[5] *Id.*
[6] Pettey, J. G., & Wagner, L. (2007). Introduction: Union gives strength—diversity and fundraising. *International Journal of Educational Advancement, 7*(3), 171-175.
[7] Burk, P. (2013). *Donor-centered leadership*. Cygnus applied research. p. 5
[8] Flandez, R. (2012, April 2). The cost of high turnover in fundraising jobs. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy.* https://www.philanthropy.com/article/The-Cost-of-High-Turnover-in/226573
[9] Haggerty, A. (2015). *Turnover intentions of nonprofit fundraising professionals: The roles of perceived fit, exchange relationships, and job satisfaction*. [Ph.D. Dissertation]. Virginia Commonwealth University. p. 80.

organizations, about half of these were planning to leave the field of fundraising entirely.[10]

One national survey asked development directors this: had they *already* given notice that they were quitting? Nearly a quarter answered either, "Yes," or "No, but I am actively considering leaving."[11] Academic researchers label turnover in fundraising as an "epidemic."[12] Those hiring fundraisers describe turnover as "crippling."[13]

The protected worker

What's going on? Other jobs face external stigma. They don't suffer from these types of retention issues. The difference is story.

Workers in other stigmatized occupations are protected. They're protected by their internal organizational stories. Researchers describe it this

https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4888&context=etd

[10] Bell, J. & Cornelius, M. (2013). *Underdeveloped: A national study of challenges facing nonprofit fundraising.* CompassPoint. p. 7 https://www.compasspoint.org/sites/default/files/documents/UnderDeveloped_CompassPoint_HaasJrFund_January%202013.pdf

[11] *Id.* Question text from Haggerty, A. (2015). *Turnover intentions of nonprofit fundraising professionals: The roles of perceived fit, exchange relationships, and job satisfaction*. [Ph.D. Dissertation]. Virginia Commonwealth University.

[12] Iarrobino, J. D. (2006). Turnover in the advancement profession. *International Journal of Educational Advancement, 6*(2), 141-169.

[13] Burk, P. (2013). *Donor-centered leadership*. Cygnus applied research. p. 15

way. These organizations promote "ideological reframing."[14] They

> "change an occupation member's dominant cognition from 'I am associated with an occupation that others view as tainted' to 'I am associated with an occupation that has intrinsic value'."[15]

These alternative stories promote occupational pride. It works. Researchers find that

> "abundant qualitative research from a wide variety of occupations indicates that people performing 'dirty work' tend to retain relatively high occupational esteem and pride." [16]

The unprotected fundraiser

But fundraisers are often *not* protected in this way. Why not? First, fundraisers usually don't work for fundraising businesses. Even within the charity, there is an "otherness" about fundraisers and their work. Their work is rarely understood. They may be viewed as magicians or jesters. But their work remains a mystery.

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[14] Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 413-434. p. 413

[15] Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., Clark, M. A., & Fugate, M. (2007). Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint. *Academy of Management Journal, 50*(1), 149-174. p. 159

[16] Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 413-434. p. 413.

This is worse when fundraisers report to non-fundraising managers. These managers completely miss the need for alternative stories. Why? Because *they* don't need "ideological reframing." *They* aren't in stigmatized occupations.[17]

Administrator story conflict

But the problem goes deeper. It's not just that these administrators *don't* promote alternative stories. It's that they can't. Because doing so would challenge *their own* hero stories.

In these stories, the charity administrators are the heroes. They battle the villains of poverty, disease, or ignorance. Donations arise simply because of their heroism.

But this isn't how effective major gifts fundraising works. Instead, the fundraiser helps the donor to define and accomplish the donor's philanthropic goals. The "guiding sage" fundraiser advances *the donor's* hero story.

This role works in fundraising. But it conflicts with the administrator-hero story. It frames administrators as merely the paid servants of the heroic donor. It puts the donor in control.

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[17] "Support for charities remains high, but large sections of the public feel no contradiction in simultaneously feeling sympathy for charitable causes and antipathy towards those who raise the funds for those causes." Breeze, B. (2017). *The new fundraisers: Who organizes charitable giving in contemporary society?* Policy Press. p. 19.

Administrators become just minions. They scamper about to accomplish the donor-hero's plans. This role is quite a downgrade for the administrators. It's no surprise they don't embrace this story.

Fundraiser story conflict

In the donor-hero story, the fundraiser has a valuable, essential, and archetypal role to play. But this story conflicts with the administrator-hero story. In that story, the fundraiser is just a money getter. The work itself has no intrinsic value.

And it gets worse. In that story, donors give simply because the organization deserves it.[18] Did the fundraiser succeed? It's only because the administrators *have already earned* those gifts. They've earned them with their heroic work. Did the fundraiser fail? It can't be the message. The administrator-hero story still feels compelling – at least to them. That leaves only one explanation. The fundraiser is doing a poor job of sharing the administrator-hero story.

Charity managers live the administrator-hero story. But in that story, fundraising is, at best, an unfortunate necessity. That internal story doesn't *overcome* external stigma. It *reinforces* stigma.

[18] Drucker, P. (1990). *Managing the nonprofit organization.* HarperCollins. p. 56.

The "tolerated" fundraiser

Other occupations face external stigma. But these workers are protected by supportive internal stories. They are protected by "ideological reframing." Fundraisers often aren't. They can face external stigma *and* internal antipathy. This can put fundraisers in a uniquely difficult role.

Professor Beth Breeze explains,

> "Of course, charity leaders are aware of the vital role that fundraising plays because they can see the evidence on their balance sheet, and because recruiting good fundraisers is one of their main managerial headaches. But there remains a disconnect between understanding the importance of the role and valuing the people filling that role. There is a widespread sense that fundraisers are tolerated because of the pressing need for the funds they can bring in, rather than a genuine appreciation of their skills and wider contribution." [19]

What is the status of fundraising in the administrator-hero story? It's tolerated. It's distasteful, but, alas, necessary.[20] (We've got to get the money somehow.) Fundraising must be endured, at least until an alternative arises.

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[19] Breeze, B. (2017). *The new fundraisers: Who organizes charitable giving in contemporary society?* Policy Press. p. 23.

[20] This precisely fits the typical description of stigmatized work as "dirty work is seen as necessary but tainted". Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 413-434. p. 429.

The "tolerated" fundraiser in research

This administrator attitude is not just talk. It's how many nonprofits are actually managed.

For years, researchers noticed that after a nonprofit received a big grant, donations would drop. The grant "crowded out" donations. The original explanation was this. Donors gave less because the work was already being funded by the grant.

Then an analysis of over 8000 charities across 17 years changed the answer. The researchers explained,

> "Crowding out is due primarily to reduced fundraising."[21]

Administrators celebrated the big grant … by cutting fundraising. In many cases, this "crowding out" was over 100%. They cut fundraising so much, they ended up with less money than if they had never received the grant.

Other research finds growth in nonprofit commercial revenues also leads to cuts in fundraising.[22] In both cases, the behavior is the same.

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[21] Andreoni, J., & Payne, A. A. (2011). Is crowding out due entirely to fundraising? Evidence from a panel of charities. *Journal of Public Economics, 95*(5-6), 334-343. p. 334.

[22] The study found "An increase in 1 dollar of commercial revenues leads to a decrease in .14 dollar of donations." A significant part of this was "attributable to nonprofit organizations' reducing fundraising activities." Hung, C. (2021). Decomposing the effect of commercialization on nonprofit

Remove the urgent necessity, and the first response is to kill fundraising.

For many administrators, the ultimate fundraising goal is this: Raise enough money so we can stop raising money.[23] Their perfect world is a world without fundraising. It's a world without fundraisers.

Mission isn't enough

Can't we fix turnover by commitment to the cause? Not really. The organization's mission is important. It's important for fundraisers, administrators, and donors. The mission often motivates fundraisers to take the job in the first place. But the mission doesn't keep fundraisers in the job.

In a national survey, most fundraisers were, "passionate about my organization's mission and field of work."[24] That's great. But statistically it didn't matter. After considering other typical job-related factors, greater passion about the mission did *not*

donations. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 32,* 448-459.

[23] As Penelope Burk explains, "Every not-for-profit is fundraising so that it can stop fundraising." Burk, P. (2013). *Donor-centered leadership.* Cygnus applied research. p. 11

[24] Haggerty, A. (2015). *Turnover intentions of nonprofit fundraising professionals: The roles of perceived fit, exchange relationships, and job satisfaction*. [Ph.D. Dissertation]. Virginia Commonwealth University. p. 54. https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4888&context=etd

predict plans to stay in the job.[25] Nor did it predict willingness to stay in the field of fundraising.[26]

Mission is ends, not means

Why isn't a good mission enough? It's not enough because it says *nothing* about *the work* of fundraising. The "mission" justification is nice. But it applies the same to any money-getting activity. The story is this. We need money. So, go get some.

This is not useful reframing of stigmatized work. Why not? Because it says nothing about *the work* itself. Researchers on job stigma explain the problem this way:

> "Given that ends are less immediate and proximal than means, it is often difficult for the ends of work to remain continuously salient." [27]

A good mission justifies the ends. It says why money is useful. But it says nothing about the means. It says nothing about the work itself. It says nothing about the intrinsic value of the work. The mission is not effective as "ideological reframing" of the work itself. The work is still only about the money.

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[25] *Id.* Tables 8 & 9

[26] *Id.* Table 10

[27] Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 413-434. p. 422.

What's the remedy?

The prognosis seems bad. The industry has a deadly symptom: Fundraiser turnover. The first step toward a treatment is identifying the underlying problem.

On the surface, the problem is stigma. Below the surface, the problem is story. Powerful, deep-seated, archetypal story. The solution? Also, story. Powerful, deep-seated, archetypal story. In the next chapter, we return to that corrective story.

8

FUNDRAISER TURNOVER SOLUTIONS: TRANSFORMING THE STORY CHARACTER

Things look bleak. Fundraisers don't stay. They don't stay at the nonprofit. They don't stay in the industry. They are stigmatized by outsiders. They are devalued by insiders. Is the situation hopeless? Actually, no.

The problem, at its core, is story. Bad story. Externally stigmatizing story. Internally dismissive story. The solution, at its core, is also story.

The one big thing

Let's go back to the beginning. The *one big thing* in fundraising is this: Advance the donor's hero story. The hero story is a universal story. It is compelling at a primal level. It is archetypal. It is the monomyth. Adopting this *one thing* transforms the paradigm for fundraising. But the transformation is not just for the donor. The transformation is also for the fundraiser.

An inspirational role

In the donor's hero story, the fundraiser fills a critical role. The fundraiser is the wise sage who guides the donor through the hero's journey. This is the role of

- Obi-Wan Kenobi (*Star Wars*)
- Minerva McGonagall (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*)
- Gandalf the Grey (*The Hobbit*)
- Morpheus (*The Matrix*)
- Mickey (*Rocky*), and
- Mr. Miyagi (*The Karate Kid*).

The fundraiser is the sage who challenges with a choice. This challenge moves the donor's hero journey forward.

But this challenge isn't the end. The fundraiser continues in this monomyth role beyond the initial challenge. She introduces the donor-hero to helpful friends and allies. She presents the donor-hero with powerful instruments. These magnify the hero's impact. The fundraiser serves as mentor, sage, advisor, and guide.

A paradigm shift

For the fundraiser, embracing this role changes things. The hero is a powerful, attractive, archetypal role. But so is the hero's guiding sage.

This character appears in all forms of myths and fairy tales. It is "the Wiseman" or "the Helper"[1] This character helps the protagonist along his or her journey, often by providing magical assistance. Paul Moxnes of the University of Oslo calls it a "primordial" role. He explains,

> "the role of the Helpers are of a deep role nature, and they are – next to the essential family roles – the most important ones in human societies."[2]

Changing the story changes the role. The fundraiser's role transforms from stigmatized to epic.[3]

Along with this change in role comes a change in goal. The goal is now to help the donor.

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[1] Moxnes, P. (1999). Deep roles: Twelve primordial roles of mind and organization. *Human Relations, 52*(11), 1427-1444.
[2] *Id.* p. 1433.
[3] This reframing from stigmatized to epic may also relate to underlying gendered associations. Dr. Elizabeth Dale explains, "The application of gender theory reveals that fundraising roles and responsibilities rely on key relationship-building and organizational tasks, which are commonly associated with stereotypical women's work and are, thus, valued less in a patriarchal society." Dale, E. J. (2017). Fundraising as women's work? Examining the profession with a gender lens. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 22*(4), e1605. The guiding-sage role, in contrast, is traditionally cast as a male role. Heroism researchers explain, "Campbell calls these helpers *mentors*, who bear a resemblance to the Jungian archetype of the *wise old man*." Allison, S.T., Goethals, G. R, & Kramers, R. M. (2017). Setting the scene: The rise of heroism science. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership* (pp. 1-16). Routledge. p. 3

Specifically, the goal is to help advance the donor's hero story. Yes, the fundraiser wants the donor to give. But she wants the donor to give in a way that advances the donor's hero story.

The gift should match the donor's values, life story, and journey. It should deliver an identity-enhancing victory. Advancing the donor's hero story is not just about delivering money to the organization. It's about delivering meaning to the donor.[4]

A change in values

Along with this change in goal is a change in values. Fundraising work is no longer just "money getting." Indeed, the actual *work* of fundraising cannot be *about* "money getting." The actual work of *any occupation* cannot be *about* "money getting." The financial outcome says nothing about the work itself.

Money for the charity is nice. But this becomes only a byproduct of effectively doing important work. Yes, effective donor guidance does benefit the organization. But the fundraiser's work is with the donor. It is about the donor's journey. It advances the donor's hero story. It encourages meaningful

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Thus, particularly within the context of a patriarchal society, reframing the fundraiser's role in these "epic" monomyth terms may increase the value placed upon the fundraiser's work.

[4] In Paul Moxnes description, the role is "the Wiseman that helps in fulfilling … spiritual (immaterial) needs." This contrasts with other helpers in other roles that focus just on material needs. Moxnes, P. (1999). Deep roles: Twelve primordial roles of mind and organization. *Human Relations, 52*(11), 1427-1444. p. 1434.

generosity. The fundraiser's work provides deep value to the donor.

Fundraiser burnout

The traditional view of fundraising manufactures fundraiser burnout. Consider the position of a new fundraiser. She starts because she loves the cause. She loves the organization.

But now she is responsible for whether it thrives or suffers. To feed it, she must do stigmatized work. She must "seek charity." The synonyms include beg, chisel, sponge, and panhandle.[5] If she fails in her unpleasant work, the thing she loves suffers. And the suffering is her fault. Good people doing noble work get fired. And it's her fault.

If she succeeds in her unpleasant work, her success is credited to others. ("We get donations because we deserve them.") Worse, her success becomes the "new normal" baseline. If she doesn't succeed *even more* next year, she fails. Again, the thing she loves suffers. Again, it's her fault.

Occasionally, things get worse. A desperate crisis, project, or campaign increases the intensity. She must do more of the unpleasant work in a short period.

[5] To "seek charity" or "beg," according to Thesaurus.com, has synonyms including solicit charity, hustle, cadge, chisel, freeload, mooch, sponge, and panhandle.

This all creates a perfect recipe. It's a recipe for negative emotion, burnout, and quitting. No wonder the average new fundraiser leaves her job in only 16 months.[6]

From fundraiser to hero's guide

But what if things were different? What if the job was not just about grabbing cash for administrators? What if the work was to guide, advise, and *help* the donor? What if the goal was to assist the donor in making a *personally meaningful* impact? What if the job was to advance the donor's hero story?

The work *itself* then becomes independently important. The work encourages the core human ideal of generosity. It delivers value to donors. It builds personally meaningful donor experiences. It makes donors, and the world, better off.

The fundraiser's occupational mission and values change. These are no longer just about the money. These are about the actual *work* of fundraising. The fundraiser's mission and values are *complimentary* to the administrator's. But they are different. They are separate. This separation changes everything.

[6] Flandez, R. (2012). The cost of high turnover in fundraising jobs. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy.* https://www.philanthropy.com/article/The-Cost-of-High-Turnover-in/226573

Hero's guide in a "crisis"

Consider this new paradigm in the previous situation. What are the emotions when a desperate organizational crisis or deadline arises? Panic and fear? Overwhelming responsibility and guilt? Dread of new unpleasant obligations? No. None of these. For the fundraiser's *separate* but *complimentary* mission, the crisis is beautiful opportunity.

> The question is not,
>
> "Oh, no! How can I solve the administrators' desperate crisis?"

The question is,

> "How can this crisis help advance the hero stories of the donors I am guiding?"

Does it tell a more urgent and compelling story? Fantastic! Does it provide an opportunity for personally meaningful and heroic gifts? Great! Does it motivate administrators to provide more resources for promoting generosity? Wonderful!

For the fundraiser's mission – the *separate* but *complementary* mission – these are superb opportunities. Administrators may be in crisis. But this need not create destructive emotional experiences for the fundraiser. In the new story, the fundraiser's core mission and values are *not* in crisis. The fundraiser's work is not the administrator's work. The fundraiser's work is to encourage meaningful generosity among the donors she is guiding. The fundraiser's work provides deep value to the donor.

The fundraiser delivers value

The bad story encourages bad behavior. If the fundraiser's job is simply "money getter," then she is a burden to donors. She is an unwelcome obligation. She gets money from donors and leaves them worse off.

But what if the fundraiser advances the donor's hero story? What if she serves as an effective guide on this journey? Then she offers real value to the donor. She provides deep, meaningful benefit.

The donor is left better off than if he had just spent more money on more consuming. What trinket is better than having a more meaningful, even heroic, life journey? More consuming can't compete with that experience.

Fundraiser retention and donor messages

Does messaging affect fundraiser satisfaction and retention? One study found a direct link.[7] Some nonprofits focused on selling the organization's story. This was the "press agent" model. Fundraising was "a one-way avenue." In these nonprofits,

> "information spews forth from the organization yet few comments, responses or concerns are returned to the organization." And, "In terms

[7] Tindall, N. T., & Waters, R. D. (2010). The relationship between fundraising practice and job satisfaction at historically Black colleges and universities. *International Journal of Educational Advancement, 10*(3), 198-215.

> of fundraising, the interests of the donor are outstripped by the interests of the organization."[8]

These organizations scored lowest in fundraisers'

- Satisfaction with the nonprofit
- Trust in the nonprofit, and
- Commitment to the nonprofit.

Another approach was the polar opposite. It was the "two-way symmetry" fundraising model. Donor communication was based on "mutuality," "cooperation," and "collaboration." Fundraisers' satisfaction, trust, and commitment were all highest in these organizations.

One approach views the donor as an ATM. Striking the donor ATM with the fundraising "stick" spits out cash. This view isn't just bad for fundraising. It's bad for fundraisers. It's bad for fundraiser retention. The opposite approach is based on providing value. The fundraiser helps the donor. She delivers value to the donor.

It's hard work

Of course, providing real value isn't always easy. It may require learning the donor's life, the donor's values, and the donor's journey. Uncovering these can be a difficult process.

[8] *Id.* p. 201-202.

Challenging another to heroism isn't easy. The monomyth sage who challenges with a choice *always* faces rejection. Refusing the call to adventure is *part of* the hero's journey. Advancing the donor's hero story is hard work.

Being a competent guide means knowing the terrain. It means knowing the dangers and the short-cuts along the journey. The effective guiding sage knows how to introduce the hero to friends and allies. The effective guiding sage offers powerful instruments or weapons. This might mean developing new giving opportunities to match the donor's story. It might mean learning about tax benefits and complex instruments. The role isn't easy. But it is important.

Identity matters

Typical fundraiser training is all about tactics. Tactics are useful. But tips and tricks don't change story. They don't change character. Playing a stigmatized character with better techniques is fine. But it's still playing a stigmatized character. Powerful solutions start deeper. They start with character and story. They start with occupational identity.[9]

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[9] In formal terms, this chapter proposes an archetypal narrative for reframing the occupational ideology of fundraising. Such ideological reframing is essential because the fundraising occupation is stigmatized. Professors Blake Ashforth (Arizona State University) and Glenn Kreiner (Penn State University) studied the entire realm of stigmatized occupations. They found the same solution everywhere. The solution was story. More technically this is called an "occupational ideology." They explain, "Occupational ideologies reframe, recalibrate, and refocus the meaning of [stigmatized] work." Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of

If you start with the right identity, techniques will follow naturally. If you start with the wrong identity, techniques won't fix the problem.[10] Michael

constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 413-434, p. 414.
In other research, this process is described as follows, "reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing may change an occupation member's dominant cognition from 'I am associated with an occupation that others view as tainted' to 'I am associated with an occupation that has intrinsic value'" Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., Clark, M. A., & Fugate, M. (2007). Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint. *Academy of Management Journal, 50*(1), 149-174, p. 159.
As another example of using the hero's journey to change one's occupational perspective, *see also* Warden, S., & Logan, J. (2017). The nurse practitioner hero's journey. *The Journal for Nurse Practitioners, 13*(7), e350-e351.

[10] The need for occupational ideology is particularly critical for new fundraisers. This is true across new employees to all types of stigmatized occupations. Writing of this need within stigmatized or "dirty work" occupations in general, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 426) explain,

> "This need for sensemaking is particularly acute for newcomers to dirty work occupations, because they must confront and reconcile themselves to the disparaged aspects of the work (Levi, 1981). As members of society, newcomers likely import stereotypic expectations but lack the subcultural armor to cope with the stereotypes and the dirty particulars of the work…. occupational ideologies are needed to provide esteem-enhancing interpretations of the stigma…. Thus, ideology serves as an important bridge for the transition from outsider to insider, providing alternative and edifying interpretations for the problematic features of work."

In contrast, the typical training for newcomers to fundraising is focused exclusively on techniques. Techniques are useful, but the terrible retention rates for new fundraisers suggests that training in techniques is not enough. Something is missing. That something is an occupational ideology that casts the work as valuable, desirable, even noble. Nonprofit administrators often miss this gap in fundraiser training because

a) They are not in a stigmatized occupation. Thus, they don't intuitively perceive the challenges inherent in the fundraiser's occupational role.
b) They believe that no occupational reframing is necessary because they will use the money for good purposes. However, this justification says nothing about the work itself. It says nothing about the value of the fundraising process itself. Thus, it does not reframe the occupation. To use an extreme example, if a drug dealer sells meth to children but gives the

Norton explains that success in fundraising is really not about what you know. It's not even about who you know. Instead, "in actual fact, it is much more about *who you are*."[11] Michael Bassoff and Steve Chalder explain,

> "The secret to rapid and astonishing success in fundraising seems to require a shift. Not a shift in what you are doing (although that will happen) but more of a shift in who you are being."[12]

Dr. Beth Breeze describes the advice this way. Effective fundraising "goes beyond the mechanical aspects" because it requires "making existential changes."[13]

Story works

The hero's journey is a primal story. In this story, the hero is a compelling archetypal character.

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proceeds to a nonprofit, this does not reframe his occupation. The use of the proceeds says nothing about the work itself.

c) Their personal "administrator-hero story" archetypal role tends to dismiss the importance of the work of the fundraiser or other efforts to provide personal value, service, or agency to the donor. Donors are viewed as being motivated to give simply because the heroic administrators deserve it.

d) Their personal "administrator-hero story" archetypal role strongly conflicts with the alternative "donor-hero story" in which the fundraiser does play a valuable and meaningful archetypal role as the sage who guides the donor hero in the hero's journey.

[11] Norton, M. (2007). *Need to know? Fundraising: Help any cause – legally, safely and effectively.* HarperCollins. p. 11.

[12] Bassoff, M. & Chandler, S. (2001) *RelationShift: Revolutionary fundraising*. Robert D. Reed Publishers. p. 1.

[13] Breeze, B. (2017). *The new fundraisers: Who organizes charitable giving in contemporary society?* Policy Press. p. 118.

But so is the hero's guiding sage. Transforming the donor's identity is powerful. But so is transforming the fundraiser's identity. The fundraiser becomes the guiding sage who advances the donor's hero story. This changes things.

The fundraiser fulfills a critical role in a personally meaningful journey. She provides deep, lasting value to the donor. She makes the donor's life more transcendent. She becomes an essential character in an epic story. That's a character worth playing. That's a story worth living.

9

Introducing the Epic Fundraiser to the Public: What's Your Job?

The universal hero story is attractive. This "monomyth" is "hard-wired into our psyches."[1] In the donor's hero story, the donor's role as hero is compelling. But the same is true for the fundraiser's role. The sage guides the hero in the epic journey. This, too, is an attractive, archetypal character.

A need for translation

The monomyth role of the hero's guiding sage can inform the fundraiser's work. It can build the fundraiser's occupational ideology.[2] It can direct the fundraiser's emotions and career. This can happen when the fundraiser *personally* adopts this role. But

[1] Pressfield, S. (2016). *Nobody wants to read your sh*t and other tough-love truths to make you a better writer.* Black Irish Entertainment LLC. p. 68.

[2] Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. Academy of Management Review, 24(3), 413-434, p. 414. ("Occupational ideologies reframe, recalibrate, and refocus the meaning of [stigmatized] work.")

how can this story role be introduced to the public? How can we make them understand?

Suppose the person sitting next to you on a plane asks, "What do you do?" You can't very well answer, "I'm Obi-Wan Kenobi." So, what *is* the right answer? The answer starts by understanding a fundamental problem. "What do you do?" is not an easy question for a stigmatized occupation.

A tricky question

"What do you do?" For the baker or the candlestick maker, the answer is simple. But if your job is stigmatized, answering this question is a problem.

Suppose you work as a slaughterhouse inspector. You like your job. You know it serves an important function in society. But you also know the likely reaction when you tell people what you do. You feel the squirm. You sense the pushback. After a while, this gets tiresome.

"What do you do?" Answering this question is a problem for stigmatized occupations. What's the typical response? Often, it's to avoid giving a clear answer. Researchers explain,

> "In socially stigmatized jobs … employees may be reluctant to share their titles."[3]

[3] Grant, A. M., Berg, J. M., & Cable, D. M. (2014). Job titles as identity badges: How self-reflective titles can reduce emotional exhaustion. *Academy of Management Journal, 57*(4), 1201-1225. p. 1201

Often the title itself is made ambiguous for outsiders. "Slaughterhouse inspector" isn't an actual job title. The actual title is "environmental health officer." A garbage collector becomes a "sanitation engineer," and so forth.

A tricky question for fundraisers

Fundraisers also face job stigma. One fundraiser shared,

> "I just did a training session for our faculty … and I asked the question, 'how many of you see fundraising as begging?' and, you know, there were hands that went up."[4]

Matching other stigmatized jobs, fundraisers often avoid clear job titles.[5] In the U.S., most use ambiguous words like "development" or "institutional advancement."[6] For outsiders, this obscures the job. Normal people don't use these words. For insiders, this portrays the job as advancing administrator goals. The job is to help the institution, not the donor.

[4] Meisenbach, R. J., Rick, J. M., & Brandhorst, J. K. (2019). Managing occupational identity threats and job turnover: How former and current fundraisers manage moments of stigmatized identities. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 29*(3), 383-399. p. 392.

[5] *Id.* p. 392

[6] James, R. N., III. (2016). Testing the effectiveness of fundraiser job titles in charitable bequest and complex gift planning. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 27*(2), 165-179.

This ambiguity goes beyond titles. One study found that fundraisers,

> "discussed avoiding using the term fundraiser in their interpersonal interactions."[7]

One fundraiser in the study explained,

> "'fundraiser,' … I don't like that name … if I were on a gameshow and they introduced me at Jeopardy I would probably say I'm a university administrator."[8]

Of course, concealment isn't the only approach. Some aggressively lead with the traditional stigmatized title. One former fundraiser explained that she would tell new acquaintances,

> "I raise money for [the university]. That's what I tell people. Because I got tired of, everybody at [the university] used to apologize for it and that drove me crazy."[9]

However, this frontal approach can generate undesirable reactions. Another fundraiser writes,

> "When responding to the question 'So what do you do?' with 'I'm a fundraiser. I ask people for money.' There's silence, then confusion, then 'I could never do that,' or 'Do you get paid to do that?' No one says: 'That must be interesting,'

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[7] Meisenbach, R. J., Rick, J. M., & Brandhorst, J. K. (2019). Managing occupational identity threats and job turnover: How former and current fundraisers manage moments of stigmatized identities. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 29*(3), 383-399. p. 392

[8] *Id.* p. 391

[9] *Id.* p. 393

or, 'I'll bet you get to meet lots of fascinating people.'"[10]

The hunt for a magic job title

Is it possible to address fundraiser stigma with a better job title? Is there a magic job title that is universally attractive to donors? I set out to answer this question in a series of experiments.[11]

I started by collecting as many fundraiser job titles as I could get. At one national fundraising conference, I gave away free copies of my book on charitable gift planning.[12] The only catch was that to get the book, attendees had to give me their business cards. I'm sure they thought I was going to spam them with sales material. But I'm a professor. I don't sell anything. Instead, my goal was to collect as many fundraiser job titles as I could find.

In total, I tested 71 different job titles with over 3,000 respondents. To keep the comparison simple, I changed all titles to "Director of _____" or "Chief _____ Officer."

[10] Perdue, P. E. (2014). *May I cultivate you? Careers in fundraising*. Petar Publishing. p. 3.

[11] James, R. N., III. (2016). Testing the effectiveness of fundraiser job titles in charitable bequest and complex gift planning. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*. 27(2), 165-179.

[12] You can download a free copy here: www.encouragegenerosity.com/VPG.pdf

The worst

First, I measured people's willingness to contact a charity employee about making a gift of stock. What was the worst performing title? Director of Advancement. Second worst? Chief Advancement Officer. Also in the bottom ten were,

- Director of Development
- Chief Development Officer
- Director of Institutional Advancement, and
- Chief Institutional Advancement Officer.

In other words, the most common job titles got the worst response. This result was true for both men and women. It was true for older and younger people. It was true for minor donors (<$1,000), moderate donors ($1,000+), and major donors ($10,000+).

It was true for giving stock. It was true for giving real estate. It was true for giving in a will. It was true for a charitable gift annuity. Across all donation scenarios, nine of the ten worst-performing job titles included the words "advancement" or "development."[13]

[13] The tenth-worst performing title was the only one that didn't include "advancement" or "development". But it wasn't even a fundraiser title. It was simply Chief Executive Officer. This result just reflects the idea that donors wouldn't normally contact the nonprofit's CEO for help with making a gift.

The best

What worked? The top titles signaled that the employee offered donors

- Guidance
- Advice, or
- Planning.

For example, "Director of Donor Guidance" and "Director of Donor Advising" were in the top ten. In fact, *every one* of the top ten job titles included some variation of "guidance," "advising," or "planning."

This was true across all four types of giving combined. It was true for both men and women. It was true for older and younger people. It was true for minor donors (<$1,000), moderate donors ($1,000+), and major donors ($10,000+).

Consider the universal hero story. What function does the hero's guiding sage provide in the monomyth? What service did Obi-Wan Kenobi, Morpheus, or Gandalf the Grey provide for the hero? Guidance. Advice. Planning. What are donors seeking when considering a significant donation? Guidance. Advice. Planning.

Was there a "magic" job title? No. Instead, there were multiple expressions of a magic concept. That concept is this: I help donors. I give donors wise guidance, expert planning, and sage advice. The

archetypal guiding-sage character attracts donors. It's what donors want.

Flip the script

"What do you do?" The fundraiser as the donor-hero's guiding sage is a new story. The new story suggests a new answer to this question.

Instead of leading with,

- Secret code words (*development*)
- Allegiance to administrators (*institutional advancement*), or
- What they wanted to *get* from donors (*fundraiser*),

What if fundraisers led with what they *offered* to donors? In a traditional fundraising worldview, this is ridiculous. The job is to *get* from donors. It's not to *benefit* donors. But this changes when the goal becomes to *advance the donor's hero story*.

The underlying benefit is guidance, advice, and planning. The description can differ depending on the fundraiser's focus. It can be as simple as,

> "I work for [*charity name*]. My job is to show our donors how to give smarter.

In complex giving, it might emphasize practical benefits. For example,

- "I teach our donors how to get special tax benefits."

- "I show our donors how to make gifts that pay them income for life."
- "I help people donate weird assets."

Each of these encourages follow-up questions. They start a conversation. If that's not the goal, the answer might be simply,

> "I help donors plan out their gifts and the impact they want to make."

An example conversation

What might such a conversation sound like? It might start with,

> Q: So, what do you do?
>
> A: I work for [*charity name*]. My job is to show our donors how to give smarter.
>
> Q: How do you do that?
>
> A: I help our donors plan their gifts to make the impact that's most meaningful for them. We work through what they care about. We discuss what's been important in their lives. Then we connect that with possible projects that reflect their values and fit into their life story. This lets them use their money in a way that's more meaningful than just consuming more stuff.

> … Are there any causes that have been important in your life?[14]
>
> … What was it that connected you to that cause?

Notice how this response leads with benefit. The benefit is, "how to give smarter." In experiments, this phrase dramatically increases interest in learning more.[15] It creates curiosity for a longer explanation.

The explanation then describes benefits in simple, helpful terms. This person is an advisor. She's a guide. She's like a personal shopper.[16] Next, it touches on a deeper level of benefit. She helps provide meaning beyond just consuming more stuff.

Then things get really interesting. The fundraiser *starts to play that role* for the listener. This is powerful. Whenever the listener plays along, it provides "free" practice at donor mentoring. The fundraiser is guiding with appreciative inquiry. She is engaging in "Socratic fundraising."[17] She may even

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[14] See testing of this phrase in, James, R. N., III. (2016). Phrasing the charitable bequest inquiry. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 27*(2), 998-1011.

[15] For experimental results testing the level of interest generated by this phrase, see James, R. N., III. (2018). Creating understanding and interest in charitable financial and estate planning: An experimental test of introductory phrases. *Journal of Personal Finance, 17*(2), 9-21.

[16] Since this book series started with a reference to the movie *City Slickers*, I'll say this is a bit like the role of the brothers who could select the precisely correct ice cream pairing for any meal.

[17] James, R. N., III. (2018). Increasing charitable donation intentions with preliminary importance ratings. *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing, 15*(3), 393-411. *See also,* Book IV in this series, *The Socratic Fundraiser: Using Questions to Advance the Donor's Hero Story*

hear a life story that connects strongly with a project at her own charity. By her conversation she is, in fact, fundraising.

Challenging the new identity

But what if the listener challenges this new identity? For example,

> CHALLENGE: So, you're a fundraiser. You ask people for money.
>
> RESPONSE: Sometimes. It depends on the donor's goals. I'm just there to bring them ideas. Sometimes that means a gift. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes that means a gift to another charity. It's mostly about thinking creatively to build interesting options.

This deflects the challenge by

1. Partially confirming. ("*Sometimes.*")
2. Addressing the aversive stereotype of a "fundraiser" as a pushy "money getter." ("*It depends on the donor's goals.*")
3. Restating the donor benefit. ("*I'm just there to bring them ideas.*")

The rest repeats the same points in more detail. The benefit description – "*ideas*" or "*creative options*" – encourages asking for examples. That opens another door for donor guidance.

Let me share a story

Sharing *an example* of a creative gift can lead to donor mentoring. In experiments, reading a heroically-framed donor story changes attitudes about giving.[18] This is especially true whenever listeners feel that the donor in the story is like them.[19] When asked for an example of a creative option, a response might sound like this:

> "I worked with one donor who is about your age. You actually remind me of her. Maybe because you both work with finances." *[Listener is like the donor.]*
>
> "In talking with her I learned that she wouldn't have been able to go to college without help from her late grandmother." *[Guiding sage elicits life story.]*
>
> "I also learned that she wanted to give others that same chance at an education." *[Guiding sage elicits goal.]*
>
> "I shared the idea of creating a permanent endowed scholarship. It would be dedicated for women studying financial planning. And it would be named in honor of her grandmother."

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[18] James, R. N., III., & Routley, C. (2016). We the living: The effects of living and deceased donor stories on charitable bequest giving intentions. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(2), 109-117.

[19] *See e.g.,* Agerström, J., Carlsson, R., Nicklasson, L., & Guntell, L. (2016). Using descriptive social norms to increase charitable giving: The power of local norms. *Journal of Economic Psychology, 52*, 147-153; James, R. N., III. (2019). Using donor images in marketing complex charitable financial planning instruments: An experimental test with charitable gift annuities. *Journal of Personal Finance, 18*(1), 65-73.

[Guiding sage provides creative option connecting with life story.]

"She loved the idea." *[Donor hero affirms value.]*

"But the $250,000 minimum cost was too much for her." *[Donor hero experiences conflict.]*

"So, I suggested that she create a 'virtual' endowment.[20] She donates the $12,000 annual payout for students now. But she also added a gift in her will that funds the full endowment principal. That way the scholarship named for her grandmother starts right away. And it's still a permanent fund." *[Guiding sage provides creative option.]*

"I love to see how she connects with these young women now. Their lives have been changed because of her giving. And I think they have a special place in her heart because of her own journey." *[Donor hero experiences victory.]*

Notice how this example tells a story. It includes backstory, goal, conflict, victory, and resolution. In it, the fundraiser serves as the donor-hero's guiding sage. The fundraiser provides value. The fundraiser suggests creative ideas. The fundraiser provides flexible solutions.

[20] See, e.g., University of Wisconsin Foundation (2012, June 1). The virtual endowment. [Website]. https://www.supportuw.org/gift-planning/virtual-endowment/

The story describes the fundraiser's job. But it also begins a donor-mentoring process. The listener identifies with the donor in the story. The listener hears of a gift connecting with the donor's

- Life story
- Family
- Career, and
- Values.

The listener learns six novel gift concepts:

1. Virtual
2. Permanent
3. Named
4. Scholarship
5. Honoring a loved one
6. For students in the donor's field.

The listener discovers the value provided by this skilled guiding sage.

One story, many applications

The underlying story is primal. The fundraiser is a guiding sage. She helps to advance the donor along the hero's journey. But this primal role is introduced gently. The fundraiser's job description leads with donor benefit. The fundraiser provides a valuable service to the donor. This idea is shared through simple words and stories.

There are, of course, many variations of this core concept. It's not about one magical description. It's not about one magical title. It's about translating the fundraiser's archetypal monomyth role into simple terms of donor benefit. That translation can be expressed in many creative ways. But the underlying story stays the same.

Conclusion

This new story role works. The fundraiser serves as the donor-hero's advisor, sage, and guide. The fundraiser helps the donor. Introducing this new role may require side-stepping the stigma of the old role. It may require new descriptions. It may require new conversations.

But when this new role is translated into simple, practical terms, it is powerful. It is attractive for donors. It can be inspirational for fundraisers. It can lead to gifts that are transformational for charities and for donors.

But with this power, comes temptation ...

10

FUNDRAISER AS SAGE OR JESTER?
THE COUNTERFEIT GUIDE

The guiding sage

The hero's journey is a universal story. In that universal story, the guiding sage plays a powerful archetypal role.

This role can direct the fundraiser's work. The fundraiser makes the call to adventure. She challenges the donor to heroism. She helps along each step of the journey. She introduces the hero to friends and allies that help. She provides magical weapons that help. She helps the donor start the hero's journey. She helps the donor finish the hero's journey. The fundraiser advances the donor's hero story.

When the fundraiser fulfills this role, it can be powerful for donors, too. It can satisfy a core need for the donor. It can result in deep, meaningful donor experiences. It can generate transformational gifts. It works.

It works, but it's hard. Fulfilling this role requires effort. It requires expertise. It requires authentic concern. It demands perseverance throughout the donor's journey. The guiding-sage role isn't just a deceptive veneer. To work, it must be real.

Donors are attracted to this helpful, knowledgeable character. But this attraction creates the temptation for phony imitation. Appearing helpful is easy. Actually helping is hard.

The counterfeit mentor

The guiding sage is an archetypal character. But, like other archetypal characters, it has a shadow. This is a similar, but inverted, character.[1] The shadow character for the sage is the jester. The jester is highly social and likes personal freedom.

Like the guiding sage, the jester is also good at talking. But the jester has no substance. The jester provides no real expertise. Like the guiding sage, the jester relates well to others. But for the jester, these relations are short and shallow. The jester quits at the punchline.[2]

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[1] See Chapter 3. *Beyond the donor hero: Fundraising and other archetypal characters.*

[2] The guiding sage is known more broadly in myth and fairytale as the "helper" or "Wiseman." In a similar contrasting parallel, Paul Moxnes of the University of Oslo explains, "The Wiseman is a person with knowledge and competence, a real Doctor of the world, one who can heal, give comfort and good advice. The bad Wiseman, on the other hand, is the False Prophet, the quack, the as-if doctor, the impostor. He is the great pretender, pretending that he has the

These character differences apply to fundraising. Differences in characters parallel differences in practice. These differences include

1. The guiding sage offers expertise. The jester doesn't know.
2. The guiding sage finishes the journey. The jester quits at the punchline.
3. The guiding sage focuses on the future. The jester lives for today.

These two characters reflect two competing identities for the fundraiser. They symbolize two competing approaches to fundraising.

1. The guiding sage offers expertise. The jester doesn't know.

The guiding sage delivers real value to donors. This means offering expertise for the donor's journey. The guiding sage should know

- Organizational possibilities
- Gift possibilities, and
- Financial possibilities.

talent and knowledge of a Wiseman, either by consciously fooling others or also by fooling himself in believing he is competent." Moxnes, P. (1999). Deep roles: Twelve primordial roles of mind and organization. *Human Relations, 52*(11), 1427-1444. p. 1434.

This practical knowledge is useful. But it becomes powerful when combined with relationship. The guiding sage knows the donor. She knows the donor's values and goals. She knows the donor's origin story. She understands the donor's journey. This fusion of practical and personal knowledge works. It creates real value for the donor.

Organizational possibilities

The guiding sage knows what the charity can deliver. She knows how to match this with the donor's journey. Sometimes, she can push the charity. She can maneuver through bureaucratic barriers. She can help the charity deliver more value to the donor. This might mean

- Tracking and reporting gift impact
- Developing motivational gift structures
- Creating compelling donor experiences
- Delivering donor gratitude, or
- Providing donor recognition and publicity.

These can help advance the donor-hero's journey. But creating them requires organizational expertise. It requires a knowledgeable insider who acts as the donor's advocate. It requires a sage. It requires a true mentor.

Gift possibilities

The guiding sage understands gift structures. She knows about

- Endowment gifts
- Virtual endowment gifts
- Memorial gifts honoring a family member
- Gifts in wills
- Gifts-in-kind
- Restricted gifts
- Asset gifts, and
- Other options.

The guiding sage not only knows the options, she also knows how to present them in a clear and compelling way.[3] She knows when donor circumstances make each option relevant.[4] She knows how to match each with the donor's journey.

[3] James, R. N., III. (2016). Phrasing the charitable bequest inquiry. *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 27*(2), 998-1011; James, R. N., III. (2018). Describing complex charitable giving instruments: Experimental tests of technical finance terms and tax benefits. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership. 28*(4), 437-452.

[4] James, R. N., III. (2015). The family tribute in charitable bequest giving: An experimental test of the effect of reminders on giving intentions. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 26*(1), 73-89; James, R. N., III. (2019). Encouraging repeated memorial donations to a scholarship fund: An experimental test of permanence goals and anniversary acknowledgements. *Philanthropy and Education. 2*(2), 1-28.

Financial possibilities

The guiding sage knows charitable financial planning. She knows how to match options with donor goals and circumstances. In the U.S., this financial knowledge can deliver massive benefit to the donor.

This isn't just for major and complex gifts. Suppose a donor wants to give only $1,000. For non-itemizers, using qualified charitable IRA distributions or gift "bunching" could save over $500.[5] Making the gift as appreciated assets could save another $371.[6]

Or suppose a donor wants to leave $1,000 in a will. Using an IRA designation instead works better. It could save the donor's heirs over $500. This works even for the smallest estates.[7]

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[5] Using these strategies the $1,000 can be excluded (via a Qualified Charitable Distribution substituting for the Required Minimum Distribution of an IRA) or deducted (via bunching all gifts into a single year allowing for itemization in that year but using the standard deduction in all other years, often accomplished through a donor advised fund so that distributions to charity remain smooth in all years). Currently, the highest marginal tax rate is 50.3% (37% from federal taxes and 13.3% from California state taxes with state taxes being nondeductible due to SALT deduction caps).

[6] A $1,000 zero-basis asset generates capital gains taxes at a maximum rate of 37.1% (20% federal capital gains tax + 3.8% affordable care act net investment income tax + 13.3% California state capital gains tax with state taxes being nondeductible due to SALT deduction caps). Donating the asset rather than donating cash eliminates payment of these taxes. Donating this $1,000 in appreciated assets (held for more than a year) also generates an income tax deduction of $1,000. For fungible assets such as stocks, the portfolio can remain the same by using the cash not donated to the charity to purchase new, otherwise identical, replacement stock. The portfolio stays the same, but the capital gain is eliminated.

[7] Heirs of any size estate must pay income taxes on inherited qualified plan money, such as a traditional IRA or 401(k). These are forms of IRD (Income in Respect of a Decedent). Heirs pay no income taxes on other (non-IRD) inherited assets. Thus, making charitable donations out of IRD rather than regular assets eliminates these income taxes. Currently, the highest marginal

Financial knowledge creates tangible donor benefit. It means actual dollars for the donors. But many fundraisers don't know even these basic concepts. Many don't care to learn. Let me be offensive. If a fundraiser isn't willing to spend 10-15 minutes a day to learn financial options in charitable planning, then she is not a sage. She is a jester. And she always will be.

The information is free. I personally made sure of that. My charitable planning textbook is free.[8] My 10 to 15-minute animated videos are free.[9] The fundraiser can choose to do the work. She can choose to provide real value. She can choose to help the donor.

But helping the donor isn't limited to finances. The expert fundraiser can help the donor along the hero's journey in many ways.

tax rate is 50.3% (37% from federal taxes and 13.3% from California state taxes with state taxes being nondeductible due to SALT deduction caps). Thus, using this technique could potentially save heirs as much as $503 for every $1,000 gift taken from IRD rather than non-IRD assets.

[8] www.encouragegenerosity.com/VPG.pdf

[9] http://bit.ly/TexasTechProfessor or if that link doesn't work, just search "Russell James Planned Giving" on YouTube

2. The guiding sage finishes the journey.

The jester quits at the punchline.

Delivering the donor-hero's journey

In the donor's hero story, the ask is the "call to adventure." It *promises* the hope of victory. It *promises* a hero's journey. *Delivering* the hero's journey is about what happens *after* the gift.

Was a gift part of a heroic process for the donor? That depends.

1. Did the organization confirm the heroism of *making* the gift?
    - Was there recognition of the gift?
    - Was there gratitude for the gift?
    - Was this expressed by the organization?
    - Was it voiced by the beneficiaries?
    - Was it confirmed by publicity of the gift?

2. Did the organization confirm the heroism of *the usage* of the gift?
    - Was the use reported back to the donor?
    - Was it described in a simple, tangible, visual way?

3. Did the organization confirm the heroism of *the resulting impact* of the gift?
    - Was there recognition of the impact?
    - Was there gratitude for the impact?
    - Was this expressed by the organization?
    - Was it voiced by the beneficiaries?
    - Was it confirmed by publicity of the impact?

These steps advance the donor-hero's journey. But they are hard work. Both the guiding sage and the jester make the ask. But the counterfeit mentor then abandons the hero. The jester quits at the punchline.

The jester quits at the punchline

This donor abandonment is common. The donor is promised a heroic journey at the ask. Then the donor is abandoned. Later, the donor is promised a heroic journey at the next ask. Then the donor is abandoned again.

The journey itself is rarely delivered. There is no confirmation of the heroism of

- The making of the gift
- The usage of the gift, or
- The resulting impact of the gift.

What happens? Donors leave. A 2018 U.S. study reported the giving behavior of 11 million

donors.[10] About 80% of first-time donors gave nothing to the charity in the following year.[11] If 80% of people who try our product won't buy it again, we have a problem.

Clearly, the experience wasn't what donors wanted. What happened *at* the ask worked. They gave. What happened *after* the ask didn't work. They didn't do it again.

The jester quits at the ask. But the guiding sage finishes the journey. When fundraisers become wise mentors, things change. They don't just *promise* to advance the donor's hero story. They deliver on that promise. They don't abandon donors in the middle of the story. And, in turn, they are not abandoned by donors at the next call to adventure.

3. The guiding sage focuses on the future. The jester lives for today.

The effective guiding sage can deliver deeply satisfying experiences for donors. These can lead to

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[10] Levis, B., Miller, B., & Williams, C. (2018). *2018 fundraising effectiveness survey report.* http://afpfep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-Fundraising-Effectiveness-Survey-Report.pdf

[11] The retention rate for first time donors in 2018 was 20.93%. Reported at https://fundraisingreportcard.com/benchmarks/
This loss rate requires massive acquisition of even more new donors just to stay even. On average, for every 100 new or previously lapsed donors who started giving, charities lost 99 previous donors who quit giving altogether. *See* Levis, B., Miller, B., & Williams, C. (2018). *2018 fundraising effectiveness survey report.* http://afpfep.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-Fundraising-Effectiveness-Survey-Report.pdf

transformational gifts for the charity. But this process is not instant. It takes time.

Along the way, there will be temptations to violate the role. These violations might seem like easy ways to grab the cash. But breaking character ends the guiding-sage role. Taking the longer view works better over time. This approach shows up in many examples.

Encouraging gifts of assets

Cash is easy. Assets are complicated. Cash is instant. Assets take time and work. Administrators want cash, not assets. But asset gifts deliver tangible benefit to donors. They're cheaper for donors.

The guiding sage delivers value. She encourages gifts of assets. This frustrates administrators' desire for instant gratification. But it serves the charity's future by serving the donor. Over the long term, delivering value to donors in this way works. Research shows it results in much greater giving to the organization.[12]

[12] Charities consistently raising gifts from assets experienced five-year fundraising growth rates six times greater than those receiving only cash (using descriptive statistics). For organizations raising over $1,000,000, total average fundraising growth from 2010 to 2015 was 11% (about the same as the combined inflation rate) when gifts came only from cash, but 66% when gifts included gifts of securities. For organizations raising $100,000 to $1,000,000 the average fundraising growth was 7 times larger for organizations raising funds from gifts of securities. (Note that this did not include organizations that received no gifts of securities in 2010, but did in 2015. This included only those organizations that received gifts of securities both in the base year, 2010, and in the end year, 2015. In other words the presence of securities gifts did not arise as a result of the overall growth in fundraising, because the securities gifts occurred both at the beginning and

Encouraging restricted gifts

Unrestricted gifts are easy. Gift restrictions are complicated. Unrestricted dollars are instant. Restricted dollars take time and work. Administrators want unrestricted cash, not restricted gifts. But gifts with instructions are often more compelling for donors. They are often better at advancing the donor's hero story.

The guiding sage frustrates administrators' desire for instant gratification. But she serves the charity's future by serving the donor. Delivering value to donors in this way works. Research shows it results in greater giving to the organization.[13]

Delivering donor gratitude, impact reporting, and publicity

Taking a gift is easy. Delivering donor gratitude is hard. So is gift impact reporting. So is delivering compatible publicity. But these efforts are

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end of the growth period measured.) Beyond this yes/no distinction, as organizations raised a larger share of gifts from cash, total contributions dropped. When they raised a larger share of gifts from securities or real estate, total contributions rose. This was true for every organization size and for every cause type (using all 26 NTEE cause-related categories). James, R. N., III. (2018). Cash is not king for fund-raising: Gifts of noncash assets predict current and future contributions growth. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 29*(2), 159-179.

[13] Chapter 12. Restricted gifts and fundraising story: Conflict and compromise between two worlds. In Book I, *The storytelling fundraiser: The brain, behavioral economics, and fundraising story.*

See, e.g., Helms, S., Scott, B., & Thornton, J. (2013). New experimental evidence on charitable gift restrictions and donor behaviour. *Applied Economics Letters, 20*(17), 1521-1526.

critical to the donor's experience. They advance the donor's hero story. Delivering value to donors in this way works. Research shows it results in greater giving to the charity.[14] The guiding sage serves the charity's future by serving the donor.

Advising against interest

Telling donors to do what helps you is easy. Telling donors to do what helps them is hard. Charity administrators won't understand advising a donor to make a gift

- Later
- Smaller
- To a different organization
- From a complicated asset
- Through a donor advised fund
- With more restrictions, or
- With income benefits.

But this works. It establishes trust and credibility.[15] It shows that the fundraiser is not just

[14] Andreoni, J. (2007). Giving gifts to groups: How altruism depends on the number of recipients. *Journal of Public Economics, 91*(9), 1731-1749; Andreoni, J. & Petrie, R. (2004). Public goods experiments without confidentiality: A glimpse into fund-raising. *Journal of Public Economics, 88*(7), 1605-1623; Merchant, A., Ford, J. B., & Sargeant, A. (2010). 'Don't forget to say thank you': The effect of an acknowledgement on donor relationships. *Journal of Marketing Management, 26*(7-8), 593-611.

[15] This can also be true when working with the donor's advisors. Laura Hansen Dean explains, "Over a long career, gift planners may find that they work with the same professional advisors over and over. Building and maintaining credibility with these advisors is a critical element in the ability of gift planners

trying to grab fast cash. She is helping. She is a true guiding sage. (This approach of "advising against interest" isn't just a fundraising technique. It works in all types of sales. This is especially true with stigmatized salespeople.[16])

Over the long term, delivering value to donors in this way works. Research shows it results in much greater giving to the organization.[17] Again, the guiding sage serves the charity's future by serving the donor.

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employed by charitable organizations to close complicated gifts." Sharing her most memorable donor story, Dean explains, "After [the donor] met with her attorney and investment advisor, she told me that they both had commented about my encouraging her to give herself time to adjust to widowhood before jumping into an irrevocable charitable trust with most of her assets. They were impressed that I had demonstrated that my university was truly committed to the best interest of our donors, not simply to getting the largest gifts we could." Dean, L. H. (2019). Laura Hansen Dean. In E. Thompson, J. Hays, & C. Slamar (Eds.), *Message from the masters: Our best donor stories that made a difference* (pp. 65-74). Createspace Independent Publishing. p. 68.

[16] Ashforth, et al. (2007) reference this as "an intriguing variant of confronting client (and perhaps public) perceptions of taint." They explain, "This involved exploiting those perceptions by acting contrary to them. A manager (no. 1) of used car salespeople provided an example: ... I say, 'Hey take a minute here with me and let me give you Sam's crash course on car buying … I'll educate you. I'll … protect you against those out there who would take advantage of your ignorance.' And that way …. when they go and meet those types that are still trying to play the manipulation games … people are going to be aware of it and go, 'Hey, that's what Sam told us.' Then my word is going to be validated, and they'll come back to me and say, 'Sam, take care of us.' By acting contrary to the occupational stereotype, the manager hoped to be seen as the exception, thereby gaining the trust of potential clients and possibly even changing their perceptions of the occupation as a whole." Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E., Clark, M. A., & Fugate, M. (2007). Normalizing dirty work: Managerial tactics for countering occupational taint. *Academy of Management Journal, 50*(1), 149-174. p. 159.

[17] Morgan, R. M., & Hunt, S. D. (1994). The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 58*(3), 20-38; Waters, R. D. (2009). The importance of understanding donor preference and relationship cultivation strategies. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing, 21*(4), 327-346.

Planting the seed or eating it

These moments of conflict provide a choice. Pursue instant gratification or invest in the long-term relationship with the donor. Building trust as an authentic guiding sage works. It's like planting seeds that will bear plentiful fruit in the future. Breaking that character for fast cash is like eating those seeds today.

The guiding sage's long view secures the organization's future. It also serves the donor. But it isn't easy. There will always be the temptation to give up the true guiding-sage role. Reverting to the jester is tempting. The jester is easier. The jester doesn't need to develop expertise. The jester quits at the punchline. The jester lives for today.

Organizational conflict

Unfortunately, some nonprofits encourage the jester's "live-for-today" attitude. Some managers don't understand the long-term benefits of helping donors. Some aren't staying long enough to care.

Ultimately, this "live-for-today" attitude doesn't work. It doesn't work for donors. It doesn't work for nonprofits. And it doesn't work for fundraisers. In a national study of fundraisers,

> "36% of respondents said they left their last job to get away from the old-school fundraising culture of 'we have to have the money now.'"[18]

The attraction of playing the "live-for-today" jester wears off quickly. It doesn't offer the depth of a meaningful, enduring, satisfying role.

Conclusion

The authentic guiding sage is a powerful role. It works. But fulfilling this role isn't easy. Providing real value to the donor is hard work. It requires developing expertise. It requires effort beyond just asking for money. It requires building relationships of trust and value over the long term.

[18] Burk, P. (2013, August 19). *Staff turnover: The 3 reasons fundraising professionals leave.* [Blog]. https://sumac.com/penelope-burk-on-the-3-reasons-fundraising-professionals-leave/

11

THE EPIC FUNDRAISER AS TRANSLATOR: SELLING TO THE INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

Hero story

In the universal hero story, a guiding sage helps the hero. The sage

- Challenges the hero to begin the journey,
- Introduces the hero to friends and allies along the way, and
- Delivers magical instruments that help the hero finish the journey.

The effective fundraiser is the donor's guiding sage. She advances the donor's hero story. In fundraising, this character is powerful and effective. It works.

But there's a problem. The problem is not with the fundraiser, the donor, or even the public. The problem is within the organization itself.

Conflicting hero story

The universal hero story is "hard-wired" into our psyches. It's deeply attractive. But not just for donors. It's also attractive for those who operate the nonprofit. But *this* hero story is different. *This* hero story is the administrator-hero story.

In this story, the people who run the nonprofit are the only heroes. Donors appear only for a moment. They enter. They express gratitude for the administrators' heroic work by donating. They exit. Fundraising isn't advancing the donor's hero story. Fundraising is asking for money by asserting *the administrators'* heroism.

This worldview has no place for the donor hero. It has no place for the guiding-sage fundraiser. The stories are in conflict:

- ✓ The guiding sage provides value to the donor.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The only purpose of the donor is to provide value *to the administrators*.

- ✓ The guiding sage matches donor desires with specific organizational projects.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The administrators are the experts. They know where the money could be best used.

- ✓ The guiding sage pairs donor preferences with ideal gift structures.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The administrators can do more with unrestricted cash. Anything else is just a hindrance.

- ✓ The guiding sage encourages gifts of assets.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. Assets create delay and administrative hassle.

- ✓ The guiding sage builds long-term trust by sometimes advising against interest.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The job of the fundraiser is always to get more cash now.

- ✓ The guiding sage advances the donor's hero story *after* the gift.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The donor's only part in that story begins *and ends* at the gift.

- ✓ The guiding sage advances the donor's hero story by providing gratitude after the gift.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The donor's gift is an expression of gratitude *to the administrators* for *their* heroic work.

- ✓ The guiding sage advances the donor's hero story by providing impact reporting of the donor's gift.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The only impact that matters in that story is the *organization's* impact, not the donor's impact.

- ✓ The guiding sage advances the donor's hero story by providing compatible publicity of the donor's gift.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The only story that matters is the story of the administrators' heroic work.

- ✓ The guiding sage helps the donor.
- ❖ But this makes no sense in the administrator-hero story. The only purpose of the donor is to help *the administrators*.

Stuck in the middle with you

The administrator-hero story motivates charity insiders. The donor-hero story motivates major donors. The organization needs both hero stories, but the stories are incompatible. Stuck in the middle is … the fundraiser. The fundraiser works for administrators living the administrator-hero story. But the job is to raise money from donors motivated by their own hero story.

Stuck in the middle – what can the fundraiser do? She can, of course, take the easy approach. She can feed the administrator-hero story back to the administrators and out to the donors. She will receive easy approval of her copy. She can show effort, activity, and professionalism, despite weak results.

But what about the fundraiser who wants to do more? The goal is not to eliminate the administrator-hero story. The goal is to manage the rival hero stories.

Empathy

This begins with empathy. It begins with understanding.

Charity administrators will tend to behave in unhelpful ways. Their hero story causes them to misperceive donor motives. It causes them to misunderstand fundraising. This can lead to bad messaging and bad management.

They aren't stupid. They aren't bad people. They're just displaying the unfortunate side-effects of an otherwise valuable and necessary occupational narrative.

Understanding this is a start. But understanding doesn't require submission. You can still push for an internal culture of philanthropy. Administrators can become more donor friendly. As Margaret Holman and Lucy Sargent write,

> "Major gift fundraising … is the culmination of a collective effort across the organisation to create a major donor-friendly culture within your charity."[1]

Organizations can do this. They can embrace delivering value to the donor as a core competency. When that doesn't work, take another approach: translate.

Translation

If the donors all spoke Spanish and the charity administrators all spoke Russian, we would have to translate. These groups may not speak different languages, but they do speak different stories. Nonprofit managers speak administrator-hero story. Major donors speak donor-hero story. The fundraiser lives in both worlds. The fundraiser needs to speak both languages. The fundraiser must translate.[2]

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[1] Holman, M. & Sargent, L. (2012). *Major donor fundraising* (2nd ed.). Directory of Social Change. p. 138.

[2] A study of the factors underlying successful major gifts solicitations reported the following:

> "Three important factors that lie behind successful "asks" are identified and discussed: First, they are made within relationships of trust rather than as a result of a transactional approach. Second, they occur as a result of fundraisers' ability to be an "honest broker" between donors and the organisations they might support. And third, they rely on the fundraisers' skills in reframing complex issues and finding alignment between the recipient organisation's needs and the philanthropic aspirations of the donor."

Breeze, B., & Jollymore, G. (2017). Understanding solicitation: Beyond the binary variable of being asked or not being asked. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 22*(4), e1607.

The role of "translator" is another way to describe this need to "reframe complex issues" and serve as a "broker" between the donor and the organization.

It's how you get what you want

Let's start with the gift. Administrators want immediate, unrestricted cash. They want a lot of it. They want it yesterday. This gift perfectly matches the administrator-hero story. The administrator makes all the decisions. He is the ruler, the expert, and the hero. The donor honors his efficiency, expertise, and heroism by humbly laying cash at his feet. The donor gives because the administrator deserves it.

So, how can we translate? How can we get charity administrators to embrace other gift types? We explain how it gets them what *they* want. We might explain,

- You dislike restricted gifts. But restricted gifts "sell" better. And didn't you already want to spend money on this project? So, what difference does it make to you? Restricting to something you planned to buy anyway is as good as unrestricted. You get what you want.

  Or maybe the money is restricted to scholarships. When it's spent to pay for tuition, what does it become? Unrestricted revenue. You get what you want.

- You dislike asset gifts because they're a hassle. But you want more money. Donors can give you more at the same cost. Asset gifts avoid more taxes. You get what you want.

More importantly, it changes the donor mindset. Giving from wealth is different. The reference point is no longer just disposable income. Gifts can become much larger. Later contributions rise dramatically. A national study of nonprofit tax returns proves it.[3] You get what you want.

- You dislike estate gifts because you have to wait. But these gifts are massive compared with annual gifts.[4] You get what you want, eventually.

  More importantly, it changes the donor mindset. When donors give from wealth, not disposable income, things change. Gifts can become dramatically larger. Annual contributions increase over 75% following addition of charity to an estate plan.[5] This increase is sustained even 2, 4, 6, or 8 years later. You get what you want.

Administrators may dislike spending to provide a compelling donor experience. They may not want to deliver donor recognition or gratitude. They may not

[3] James, R. N., III. (2018). Cash is not king for fund-raising: Gifts of noncash assets predict current and future contributions growth. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 29*(2), 159-179.

[4] Those with estates under $2 million generate estate donations worth 3.5 times their annual giving. For estates $2-$5 million, it's 20 times. For estates $5-$10 million, it's 25 times. For estates $10-$50 million, 28 times. For estates $50-$100 million, it's 50 times. For estates $100 million+ it's 103 times annual giving. Steuerle, C. E., Bourne, J., Ovalle, J., Raub, B., Newcomb, J., & Steele, E. (2018). *Patterns of giving by the wealthy.* Urban Institute. Table 4.

[5] James, R. N., III. (2020). The emerging potential of longitudinal empirical research in estate planning: Examples from charitable bequests. *UC Davis Law Review, 53*, 2397-2431. p. 2422.

want to track individual gift impact. But this can all be translated. It can increase future giving. It can be a solid investment to get more cash. It's a way for the charity administrator to get what he wants.

As the father of economics, Adam Smith, explained in 1776,

> "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages."[6]

We translate for administrators. We do this not by showing how it delivers more value to the donors. We do this by showing how it gets them what they want.[7]

[6] Smith, A. ([1776] 1986). An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations. In R. L. Heilbroner (Ed.), *The essential Adam Smith* (pp. 149-320). W. W. Norton. p. 169

[7] This conflict – and solution – is not limited to fundraising. In business, large ticket sales do not work effectively under the same processes as small ticket sales. Effectively managing these "key accounts" requires the establishment of long-term, consultative relationships which may, at times, feel at odds with managers trying to hit immediate sales goals. Researchers have labeled key account managers who thrive in this conflicted world "arbiters." Who are they? "Arbiters are employees who identify highly with both entities, their organization and their customer. Such Key Account managers aim to create value for both sides." Peters, L., Ivens, B. S., & Pardo, C. (2020). Identification as a challenge in key account management: Conceptual foundations and a qualitative study. *Industrial Marketing Management, 90*, 300-313.

Otherwise, we'll lose to the competition

Ultimately, fundraising lives in a world of choice. The administrator delivers value to the donor. He does this not because he wants to, but because he must. Otherwise, the donor won't give. Or, more likely, he'll give to a competitor.

We often want leadership to support budget increases for fundraising and marketing. What metrics work best for this? One study researched this at over 200 charities. The most influential metric was "Comparisons with other charities."[8]

Administrators understand competition. What focuses them on delivering compelling donor experiences? Seeing their competition doing it better. Seeing that they are losing.

Want charity administrators to accept the hassle of asset gifts? Don't just tell them these can save donors 30% compared with cash. Show them a competitor who is getting more of these gifts. (To find examples, look at other charities' IRS Form 990s Schedule M.[9])

[8] Or in another analysis, "Marketing expenditures of other charities in the sector." This points to the power of comparisons with other organizations to influence leadership. The least useful? "Predicted improvements in donors' feelings of satisfaction with or commitment to the organization." This points to the need to translate donor benefit into something that fits into the worldview perspective of charity leadership. Results from Bennett, R. (2007). The use of marketing metrics by British fundraising charities: a survey of current practice. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(9-10), 959-989.

[9] These are freely available at a variety of sites such as guidestar.org ; www.erieri.com/form990finder ; candid.org/research-and-verify-nonprofits/990-finder

Suppose a donor wants specific instructions for a scholarship fund. Don't just explain how this will deliver a compelling donor experience. Instead, show a community foundation that *will* accept these instructions.[10] Point out how these competitors won't limit the scholarship just to your school.

Competition can motivate. But the real motivation starts by recognizing the real competition. It's probably not who you think it is.

The ultimate competitor

The ultimate competitor for major gifts is not the nonprofit down the street. It's not another charity representing your cause. It's always and only one organization. It's the private family foundation.

They're named for and controlled by the donor and the donor's family. They follow the donor's detailed instructions. Forever. For donors who can afford them, private family foundations are your *biggest* rival. Nonprofit managers and fundraisers often miss this. They remain blithely unaware of their real competition.

Much has been written about the coming intergenerational wealth transfer. And it *will* include massive gifts to nonprofits. But probably not to *your* nonprofit. Why? Because over 2/3 of charitable

[10] As an example, the Oklahoma Community Foundation administers more than 200 such scholarship funds. See https://www.occf.org/scholarships/

bequest money goes to private foundations.[11] Your competition is kicking your butt.

This isn't just about estate giving. Private foundations receive nearly a third of all current donations from the wealthiest donors.[12] This trend is increasing. Charitable giving remains flat at about 2% of GDP. But private foundation wealth has been growing at more than double the rate of GDP.[13] Donor advised funds are growing even faster. They now constitute six of the ten largest fundraising organizations in the U.S.[14]

This shows how donors respond to receiving more control. They give. But it can also reframe administrator views. Charity administrators do not *prefer* donor control. But they do understand competition.

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[11] For decedents in 2007 and 2013, respectively, 72.3% and 67.5% of all charitable bequest dollars reported on tax returns went to private foundations. *See* Internal Revenue Service. (2010). *Estate tax returns filed for 2007 decedents making charitable bequests, and recipients of charitable bequests, by sex and marital status of decedent.* [Excel spreadsheet]. https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/07es04yd.xls and Internal Revenue Service. (2017). *estate tax returns filed for 2007 decedents making charitable bequests, and recipients of charitable bequests, by sex and marital status of decedent*. [Excel spreadsheet]. https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/13es03yd.xls

[12] Giving USA. (2016). *Giving USA 2016: The annual report of philanthropy for the year 2015.* Giving USA. p. 203.

[13] Internal Revenue Service - Statistics of Income. (n.d.). *Domestic private foundations, tax year 2013*, https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/2013privatefoundationsonesheet.pdf

[14] Philanthropy news digest. (2017, November 2). *Fidelity Charitable tops list of largest charities in 2016.* https://philanthropynewsdigest.org/news/fidelity-charitable-tops-list-of-largest-charities-in-2016

Understanding *the real* competition changes the game. It's not about whether the donor or the administrator controls the donor's money. It's about *which* organization will win the donor-controlled money.

The guiding sage in the middle

The fundraiser may not be in control of the organization. She may be stuck in the middle between two rival worldviews. But she can still be effective. She can advocate for the donor. She can translate the donor's quest into the language of the administrator. She has the expertise to advance the donor's heroic journey. She can be the guiding sage for the donor. She can do this both outside and inside the organization. Sometimes, the organization's structure can help. The next chapter looks at this.

12

ORGANIZATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO FUNDRAISING WITH RIVAL HERO STORIES

Story conflict

Advance the donor's hero story. In major gifts fundraising, this works. It works for the donor. The donor is the hero. It works for the fundraiser. The fundraiser is the guiding sage.

But a nonprofit is not just a fundraising organization. It's also an operational organization. It might be a hospital, a university, or a museum. It might deliver healthcare, research, or education. For this operations side, the donor-hero story *does not* work.

In the donor-hero story, charity administrators are minions. They merely scamper about doing the heroic donor's bidding. Whatever happens results from *the donor's* decisions, not the administrator's. The administrator's role is only to dutifully obey donor orders. Embracing the donor-hero story

inspires fundraising. But it doesn't inspire charity insiders.

What works for this group is the administrator-hero story.[1] The employees heroically battle against a villain. They fight disease, ignorance, or suffering. They face obstacles, conquer enemies, and gain victories. This hero story is powerful. It's what attracted them to the job in the first place. It provides significance in their daily work. It keeps them from leaving to make more money elsewhere. It works.

This story conflict is simple. The most compelling hero story is our own. Dr. Olivia Efthimiou writes,

> "We are the heroes of our own story. That much is undeniable. We can be skeptical about assigning the label of 'hero' or 'heroine' to ourselves; most of us are. We may even have a

[1] One mathematical economic model suggests that effective organizations will select one of two types of organizational stories to motivate employees. The researchers explain,

> "Our model predicts that an organization will adopt one of two designs. The first design, which we call a "purpose-driven" organization, pairs flat monetary incentives with a story that emphasizes the importance of generating output (e.g., saving lives, putting a person on the moon). The second one, which we call an "incentive-driven" organization, pairs steep monetary incentives with a narrower story that emphasizes the importance of maintaining ethical standards (e.g., maintaining quality, helping peers)."

Nonprofits rarely offer employees "steep monetary incentives." Thus, it makes sense that a heroic organizational story "e.g., saving lives, putting a person on the moon" will be especially important for motiving employees in nonprofits. [Quoting from Akerlof, R., Matouschek, N., & Rayo, L. (2020). Stories at work. *American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*, 110, 199-204.]

> deep resistance to it. But heroism is in our blood."[2]

Each story is important for each group. But the stories conflict.

Culture conflict

The conflict goes beyond stories. Effective fundraising culture isn't just *different* from the rest of the nonprofit. In many ways, it's the *opposite*.

> Penelope Burk writes,
>
> "The not-for-profit sector is exactly what its name suggests – a sector constituted to not make a profit. But inside hundreds of thousands of organizations that have been granted this status are bustling profit centers called Development or Fundraising Departments. They are charged with the opposite responsibility – to make as much profit as possible."[3]
>
> Alan Clayton explains,
>
> "The fundraiser has to be a truly awesome person because what in effect they are doing is running a private sector culture business,

[2] Efthimiou, O. (2019, July 23). Riding the blue moon: The heroic journey of healing ourselves and others. In S. T. Allison & G. R. Goethals (Eds.), *Heroes: What they do & why we need them - a commentary on today's heroes*, [website], University of Richmond, https://blog.richmond.edu/heroes/page/3/

[3] Burk, P. (2013). *Donor-centered leadership.* Cygnus applied research. p. 12

inside an academic, medical or public sector culture organisation."[4]

This culture difference goes beyond profit. The operations side is about

- Analytical complexity
- Shared governance, and
- Risk management.

A slow, careful, bureaucratic culture works for operations, but it is death for fundraising. Fundraising is about dreams and possibilities. It's about individual impact and compelling story.

Fundraising is an ambitious, achiever, emotion-centered operation. But it functions inside of a risk-averse, planner, analytic-centered entity. The conflict is real. So, how can we resolve it?

Power structures

One approach to conflict is the zero-sum game. Whatever one side wins, the other side loses. The question is simple. Who's in charge?

Different structures give donors different levels of control:

1. Donor has complete control of organization.

[4] Williams, W. (2019, April 4). *A new ambition*. Pro Bono Australia. https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2019/04/a-new-ambition/

Example: Donor creates a private family foundation.

2. Donor has limited control of organization.

   Example: Donor is a board trustee.

3. Donor has complete control of his gift.

   Example: Nonprofit allows a broad range of donor-created gift restrictions.

4. Donor has limited control of his gift.

   Example: Nonprofit allows only a few pre-approved gift restrictions.

5. Donor has no control of his gift (other than not giving).

   Example: Nonprofit allows only unrestricted gifts.

6. Taxpayer

   Example: Government forces unrestricted contributions.

Charity administrators prefer scenarios lower on the list. They want to make all decisions (#5). Donors should just give and then go away. Even

better is if government grants (#6) remove the need for donors altogether.[5]

However, major donors prefer the other scenarios. They like control, too. So, what's the right structure?

Answer 1: The administrator "wins"

Many charities are wholly devoted to the administrator-hero story. The donor-hero story is banned. Commonly, these nonprofits focus on high-volume, small gifts. This works for two reasons.

First, the administrator-hero story *can* motivate giving. It can motivate small "pat-on-the-head" gifts.[6] These show approval for what "those people" are doing. They reflect feelings of "isn't that nice for you."

Second, this fundraising advances the administrator-hero story. A mass appeal can tell the administrator-hero story to thousands. It might produce few gifts, but it's emotionally satisfying for the nonprofit leaders.

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[5] Andreoni, J., & Payne, A. A. (2011). Is crowding out due entirely to fundraising? Evidence from a panel of charities. *Journal of Public Economics, 95*(5-6), 334-343. p. 334.

[6] For use of the administrator-hero story in small dollar mass appeal letters, *see, e.g.,* Dixon, C. R. (2008). *The complete guide to writing successful fundraising letters*. Atlantic publishing. p. 143

Alas, such nonprofits usually do poorly in major gifts. The resistance to donor control is too great. The idea of delivering value to donors is too foreign. Focusing on *the donor's* experience and *the donor's* impact just doesn't fit.

So, the administrators "win." They control the story. They control the organization. They just never get the resources to make much impact.

Answer 2:
The donor becomes the administrator

When does the administrator-hero story work for donors? When the donor *becomes* an administrator. For the board trustee donor, the two hero stories merge.

The donor becomes a leader.[7] The nonprofit becomes his responsibility. Its success reflects his success. The nonprofit's impact *becomes* the donor's impact. The donor identifies with the organization.

Board membership can help in other ways. It can build a community of major donors.[8] This provides socially relevant examples of others giving. It provides a socially relevant audience for the donor's giving. Membership signals resources and shared

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[7] Ideally, the board member is a leader, not a manager. The proper function of the nonprofit board is governance, not management.

[8] Callen J. L., Klein, A. & Tinkelman, D. (2003). Board composition, committees, and organizational efficiency: The case of nonprofits. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 32(4), 493-520.

values. This supports future cooperative ventures among members.[9] Such membership has real financial value.

This power-sharing with select donors can work. But it's limited. It works for only a few donors.[10] What else works?

Answer 3:
Two organizations

At first, the private family foundation seems entirely one sided. The donor has all of the power. He gets all of the honor. He's the only hero. But it's part of a larger ecosystem. The foundation makes grants to operating charities. This system allows both hero stories.

For the operating charity, grants are all about *the administrator-hero story*. The nonprofit delivers some heroic outcome. It finds foundations wanting to

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[9] James, R. N., III. (2017). Natural philanthropy: a new evolutionary framework explaining diverse experimental results and informing fundraising practice. *Palgrave Communications, 3*, 17050.

[10] Some organizations have expanded this solution to involve a larger number of donors. In one approach, new members of the controlling board of trustees can be selected only from members of a much larger board of advisors. This larger board of advisors provides non-binding advice, opinions, and guidance to the executive director and the controlling board of trustees. It also serves as a training ground for prospective new trustees. Such an advisory board can become very large without risk of affecting the operational efficiency of the actual governing board. Its meeting can serve as a platform to facilitate a large gathering of donors at a charity event. It also serves as a way to keep former trustees engaged when there are trustee term limits. Some organizations instead use donor voting where active donors actually vote on trustees to be appointed to the governing board. This also expands the number of donors involved in organizational governance.

fund that outcome. It analytically proves its efficiency. It beats out the competitors. It gets the money "because the organization deserves it."[11] Grant seeking fits the administrator-hero story.

For the donor, grants are all about *the donor's* hero story. The donor gives to a donor-created, donor-controlled, donor-named permanent entity. It funds only donor-selected heroic goals. Nonprofit administrators are minions. They fight for the privilege of doing the donor's bidding. If the administrator doesn't like it, tough. They don't get the grant.

This separation is powerful. It encourages both generosity and operational efficiency. It separates the gift-receiving and the operating entities. It allows both hero stories.

Answer 4:
The federalist organization
(Be together, not the same.)

The foundation-grantee ecosystem works. But how does this help fundraising nonprofits? They must do both fundraising and operations.

A related approach can work. Here the solution is not external separation of organizations. Instead, it's internal separation of cultures. The

[11] Drucker, P. (1990). *Managing the nonprofit organization.* HarperCollins. p. 56.

answer is the Android slogan: "Be together, not the same."

Internal separation can work. In government, this is federalism. Texas culture is not the same as California culture. Maine is not New York. But each can still be part of one nation.

The effective nonprofit needs both stories. It needs both cultures. But one side starts with all the power. Every nonprofit is run by insiders. Administrators have the authority. The donor's only power is negative. The donor can walk away.

Preserving both cultures starts by protecting fundraising. It must be protected from the slow, complex, bureaucratic culture of operations-side management. It must be protected from the administrator-hero story.

Protect fundraising from operations-side managers

The problem isn't just that administrators don't understand fundraising. The problem is they don't understand that they don't understand fundraising. What do fundraisers report as the "biggest fundraising challenge?" It is this:

> "My colleagues/boss/others don't understand fundraising and they won't let me do my job!"[12]

[12] Brooks, J. (March 9, 2020). *It takes 2 cultures to make a great nonprofit — and that can be hard!* [Blog]. Moceanic. https://www.moceanic.com/2020/2-cultures-great-nonprofit/

Alan Clayton calls this being,

> "surrounded by ALOOF people – Amateurs with a Lot Of Opinions about Fundraising."[13]

This can be worse for fundraisers in one-person shops. They neither work with nor report to other fundraisers. What is their most commonly reported work problem (aside from having too much work to do)? It is this: lack of collegial atmosphere.[14]

This can affect retention. Development directors at small nonprofits were 2.5 times more likely to be planning to leave fundraising within two years.[15]

Let fundraisers run fundraising

Retention can be a problem. But not everyone leaves. So, why do fundraisers stay? One study looked at this. It asked fundraisers with no intention to leave why they planned to stay. Of course, belief in the charity's mission was important. Aside from this, the most common reason was

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[13] Williams, W. (2019, April 4). *A new ambition*. Pro Bono Australia. https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2019/04/a-new-ambition/

[14] Burk, P. (2013). *Donor-centered leadership*. Cygnus applied research. p. 52.

[15] This was 11% at organizations with budgets over $10 million and 27% at organizations with budgets under $1 million. Bell, J. & Cornelius, M. (2013). *Underdeveloped: A national study of challenges facing nonprofit fundraising.* CompassPoint. p. 7. https://www.compasspoint.org/sites/default/files/documents/UnderDeveloped_CompassPoint_HaasJrFund_January%202013.pdf

> "being included as a respected participant in discussions and decision-making on issues affecting fundraising."[16]

Giving fundraisers the power to run fundraising works. Such fundraisers don't just stay. They also succeed. Development directors in high-performing[17] organizations were different. They were nearly twice as likely to report having "a lot of influence on financial goals."[18]

Protecting and respecting the fundraising culture within the organization is key. It affects performance. For example, one national study found that,

> "57% of development directors at high-performing organizations strongly agreed that their organizations valued them for their fund development skills, knowledge, and expertise, compared to 31% of other development directors."[19]

The appreciation of fundraising starts at the top. This study of nonprofits found that,

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[16] Burk, P. (2013). *Donor-centered leadership*. Cygnus applied research. p. 47.
[17] Defined as "These are executive director and development director respondents whose organizations have created a broad base of support from individuals —25% or more of their annual budget — and who rated their overall fundraising program as 'very effective.'"
Bell, J. & Cornelius, M. (2013). *Underdeveloped: A national study of challenges facing nonprofit fundraising.* CompassPoint. p. 11.
https://www.compasspoint.org/sites/default/files/documents/UnderDeveloped_CompassPoint_HaasJrFund_January%202013.pdf.

[18] 64% at high-performing organizations vs. 37% at others. *Id.* p. 16.
[19] *Id.* p. 18.

> "executives at high-performing organizations were twice as likely as their peers to say they 'love' asking individuals for donations."[20]

Protect both cultures

A charity has both an internal operations side and an external fundraising side. Advancing the mission requires both sides. This means bringing both groups together, while protecting each. Jeff Brooks suggests this:

> "Publicly define the two cultures. Make it an ongoing conversation. Just knowing that you think differently from someone else, and that it's perfectly okay – that's a big step toward reconciliation."[21]

In the effective charity, people from each side learn to appreciate the other's work. They learn to focus on common goals, common enemies, and mutual benefit. Start simple. For example,

- Validate fundraising. No money = no mission. Getting money that advances some part of the mission is a good thing.
- Have a common fundraising goal. Getting more donor money requires a compelling donor experience. It means delivering more

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[20] *Id.* p. 14.

[21] Brooks, J. (March 9, 2020). *It takes 2 cultures to make a great nonprofit — and that can be hard!* [Blog]. Moceanic. https://www.moceanic.com/2020/2-cultures-great-nonprofit/

value to donors. Doing this takes everyone working together.[22]

- Have a common fundraising enemy. Charitable foundations, funds, and trusts give donors control and benefits. They also get the largest gifts. So, don't just fight over how much control your donors will get. Instead, focus on beating the competition. Focus on getting the donor-controlled money to come to *your* organization.

Protect both stories

The donor-hero story works for external fundraising. The administrator-hero story works for internal operations. An organization can silence one of these stories. But this will shrink its impact.

Both stories are important. The effective charity fosters excellent operations and excellent fundraising. But this isn't easy. These two sides thrive in differing cultures. They are motivated by conflicting stories.

Protecting both sides may require mutual understanding and respect. It may mean neither side gets everything it wants. But making room for both cultures is powerful. Protecting both stories works.

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[22] The goal is to create a "culture of philanthropy" within the organization. *See* Joyaux, S. (March 27, 2015). *Building a culture of philanthropy in your organization*. [Webpage]. Nonprofit Quarterly. https://nonprofitquarterly.org/culture-of-philanthropy-define-philanthropy/

13

MAKING THE PERFECT FUNDRAISING ASK:

LESSONS FROM OBI-WAN, GANDALF, AND MORPHEUS

Universal challenge

Let's go to the movies! And when we go, what will we see? If it's a blockbuster, we'll often see a similar underlying story. It's called the hero's journey.

The hero's journey is a universal story. It's found across cultures, lands, and times. This universal journey is launched with a challenge. That challenge is the "call to adventure." The prospective hero must choose:

- Stay in his small, self-focused, ordinary world, or
- Go on a costly adventure to impact the larger world.

The journey won't be easy. It will require sacrifice. But there is a hope of victory. Along the way, a guiding sage will help the hero. This sage will introduce the hero to friends, allies, and magical instruments.

Ultimately, the hero will prevail. He will return victorious, bringing a gift to enhance his original world. Through the journey, his original identity will become a new, enhanced identity. Externally, he will be honored. Internally, he will be transformed.

Universal steps: Identity, challenge, victory

Joseph Campbell calls this story the "monomyth." He summarizes it as,

> (1) "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day" (2) "into a region of supernatural wonder:" (3) "fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won:" (4) "the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[1]

This hero story describes an identity enhancement journey. It progresses through

Original Identity → **Challenge** → **Victory** → **Enhanced Identity**

[1] Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 28. (The numerical separations do not appear in the text.)

Or, as a cycle,

Challenge
↗ ↘
Identity ← Victory

(1) The journey starts in the ordinary world. This is the source of the hero's *original identity* defined by his people, values, and life story.

(2) The decision to venture forth into a new world is the *challenge*.

(3) Accepting this *challenge* ultimately results in a *victory*.

(4) The hero then returns with a gift to improve his original world. His journey enhances that world (the source of his people, values, and life story). It enhances his standing within that world. His *victory* results in public honor and private transformation. It leads to an *enhanced identity*.

Fundraising challenge

In fundraising, advancing the donor's hero story is powerful. It can inspire major, transformational gifts. As in every hero story, the journey is launched with a *challenge*.

This fundraising "call to adventure" happens at the "ask." It presents a choice to either

- Stay in the small, self-focused, ordinary world of personal consumption, or
- Go on a costly adventure to impact the larger world through philanthropy.

The heroic fundraising ask will include each story element.

(1) The donor's *original identity* (from his people, values, or life story) will inspire accepting the *challenge*.

(2) It will be a heroic *challenge*. The choice will be costly. It will require sacrifice.

(3) The *challenge* will promise a *victory*.

(4) The promised *victory* will enhance the donor's *identity*. It will protect people or values linked to his *identity*. It will improve his external or internal reputation.

The heroic ask links *identity*, *challenge*, and *victory*.

What does such an epic ask look like? We'll look at some fundraising examples. But first, let's go to the movies! The classic monomyth films demonstrate these heroic ask elements.

The "call to adventure": Let's go to the movies

Star Wars, *The Hobbit*, and *The Matrix* are all classic monomyth films. They're also the highest

grossing movie franchises of their times.[2] In all three, the guiding sage delivers the "call to adventure." The sage challenges the prospective hero:

> *Leave behind your small, self-focused, ordinary world!*
>
> *Go on a costly adventure to make an impact for good in the larger word!*

The challenge is clear. It's a simple, yes-or-no choice. It's not easy. It's a big ask. But the challenge promises the hope of victory. And in each case, the sage links the challenge to the prospective hero's identity. The message is this:

> *Take this challenge because of who you are!*
> [your people, your values, and your life story]

The monomyth "call to adventure" matches the compelling fundraising ask. These movie scenes reveal an archetypal pattern for real-world fundraising.

Star Wars "call to adventure"

Identity comes from one's life story, people, and values. The "call to adventure" scene in *Star War*s begins there. It begins with the prospective

[2] An argument for paying special attention to these scripts is that their success might suggest a resonance with underlying archetypal story elements from the collective unconscious. More simply, these are stories that – more than many thousands of others – worked. Thus, whether arrived at by studiously following the monomyth playbook (as with *Star Wars*), by artistic genius, or by random chance, the objective empirical reality is that these stories worked and thus merit special attention.

hero's life story and people. It begins with Luke's family.

> LUKE: How did my father die?
>
> OBI-WAN: A young Jedi named Darth Vader, who was a pupil of mine until he turned to evil, helped the Empire hunt down and destroy the Jedi Knights. He betrayed and murdered your father. Now the Jedi are all but extinct.[3]

The life story continues by including values.

> OBI-WAN: Vader was seduced by the dark side of the Force.
>
> LUKE: The Force?
>
> OBI-WAN: Well, the Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together.[4]

Luke then hears the clear, simple challenge. It comes first from Leia.

> LEIA: I have placed information vital to the survival of the Rebellion into the memory systems of this R2 unit ... You must see this droid safely delivered to him on Alderaan. This is our most desperate hour. Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're my only hope.[5]

---

[3] Lucas, G. (January 15, 1976) *STAR WARS Episode IV A NEW HOPE from the JOURNAL OF THE WHILLS*, Revised Fourth Draft, https://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Star-Wars-A-New-Hope.html

[4] *Id.*
[5] *Id.*

And then from Obi-Wan,

> OBI-WAN: You must learn the ways of the Force if you're to come with me to Alderaan.
>
> LUKE: Alderaan? I'm not going to Alderaan. I've got to go home. It's late, I'm in for it as it is.
>
> OBI-WAN: I need your help, Luke. She needs your help.[6]

The challenge is clear. Leave behind the small, self-focused world of farming. Make an impact for good in the larger world. It is a stark "yes" or "no" decision. The challenge is immediate. The crisis/opportunity is now.

This challenge links with Luke's identity (people, values, and life story). It links with the story of his father. It includes the spiritual values from that life story.

The challenge promises a victory – saving the rebellion. This victory links back to Luke's people and values. The rebellion fights against his father's murderer (people). It fights the dark side (values).

The promised victory is personally meaningful. It is meaningful *because of who he is*. It is meaningful because of his family, values, and life story. It is also meaningful *because of who he will become*. The

[6] *Id.*

promised victory requires learning "the ways of the force." The journey will lead to a personal transformation.

The decision to accept the challenge isn't a mathematical cost/benefit analysis. It is a matter of *identity*. Luke must accept the challenge *because of who he is*. He must accept because of his family, values, and life story.

Like the epic fundraising ask, this "call to adventure" makes a clear challenge. It links the prospective hero's identity to the challenge. The challenge promises a victory. The victory promises an enhanced identity.

The Hobbit "call to adventure"

In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf arrives in the shire. He immediately makes a naked "call to adventure."

> BILBO: Can I help you?
>
> GANDALF: That remains to be seen. I'm looking for someone to share in an adventure.
>
> BILBO: An adventure? No, I don't imagine anyone west of Bree would have much interest in adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things. Make you late for dinner. Heh, heh. Mm. Huh. Hmm. Oh. Ah. Good morning.[7]

[7] Walsh, F., Boyens, P., Jackson, P., & del Toro, G. (2012). *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey – Unofficial Transcript (based on the novel The Hobbit by*

Gandalf makes the challenge. Bilbo says "no." Gandalf is unfazed. (This initial refusal is a normal part of the monomyth story.)[8] Gandalf responds. He responds with identity connections (people, values, and life story). He mentions Bilbo's mother. He mentions Bilbo's earlier life.

> GANDALF: To think that I should have lived to be "good morninged" by Belladonna Took's son as if I were selling buttons at the door.
>
> BILBO: Beg your pardon?
>
> GANDALF: You've changed, and not entirely for the better, Bilbo Baggins.[9]

The full "call to adventure" scene happens later. Gandalf brings a large audience to Bilbo's house. Each of them has already committed to the challenge. Their leader explains why his people, values, and life story compelled him to accept the challenge.[10]

J.R.R. Tolkien). https://pjhobbitfilms.fandom.com/wiki/The_Hobbit:_An_Unexpected_Journey/Transcript

[8] *See* Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Chapter I.2. Refusal of the call. Princeton University Press. p. 45-54. For the practical applications to fundraising *see* James, R. N., III. (2021) *The Socratic fundraiser: Using questions to advance the donors hero story*. Chapter 10. Socratic fundraising after the ask: Congratulations! You got a "no."

[9] Walsh, F., Boyens, P., Jackson, P., & del Toro, G. (2012). *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey – Unofficial Transcript (based on the novel The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien)*. https://pjhobbitfilms.fandom.com/wiki/The_Hobbit:_An_Unexpected_Journey/Transcript

[10] Thorin: I would take each and every one of these dwarves over an army from the Iron Hills, for when I called upon them, they answered. Loyalty, honor, a willing heart. I can ask no more than that.

Gandalf lays out the challenge with a map – his proposal document! It is a quest with enemies, a treasure, and an epic victory. His presentation even ends with a formal contract to sign!

The challenge is clear. Leave behind the small self-focused world of the shire. Go on an adventure to impact the larger world. It is urgent. The group is leaving in the morning.[11] It is a stark "yes" or "no" decision.

Bilbo resists. Gandalf again appeals to Bilbo's identity. He mentions Bilbo's life story.

> GANDALF: I remember a young Hobbit who was always running off in search of Elves in the woods. Who would stay out late, come home after dark … trailing mud and twigs and fireflies. A young Hobbit who would have liked nothing better than to find out what was beyond the borders of the Shire. The world is not in your books and maps. It's out there.[12]

Again, Bilbo resists. Again, Gandalf appeals to Bilbo's identity. He mentions Bilbo's family history.

Balin: You don't have to do this. You have a choice. You've done honorably by our people. You have built a new life for us in the Blue Mountains. A life of peace and plenty. A life that is worth more than all the gold in Erebor.

Thorin: From my grandfather to my father, this has come to me. They dreamt of the day when the dwarves of Erebor would reclaim their homeland. There is no choice, Balin. Not for me.

Id.

[11] The dialogue also includes, "Oin has read the portents, and the portents say: it is time." *Id.*

[12] *Id.*

> BILBO: I can't just go running off into the blue. I am a Baggins of Bag-end.
>
> GANDALF: You are also a Took. Did you know that your great-great-great-great-uncle Bullroarer Took was so large, he could ride a real horse?
>
> BILBO: Yes.
>
> GANDALF: Yes, well, he could. In the Battle of Green Fields, he charged the Goblin ranks. He swung his club so hard, it knocked the Goblin king's head clean off ...[13]

Bilbo consistently resists with rational cost/benefit analysis. Gandalf consistently responds by focusing on Bilbo's identity. He highlights the people, values, and life story elements that support taking the challenge.

Bilbo must accept the challenge *because of who he is*. His identity compels him to say "yes." This includes Bilbo's life story – his adventuresome youth searching for elves. It includes his people – his ancestor who defeated the Goblin king. It is spurred on by an audience of others committed to this same challenge.

Bilbo also must accept the challenge *because of who he will become*. The promised victory will lead to an enhanced identity.

[13] *Id.*

> GANDALF: You'll have a tale or two to tell of your own when you come back.
>
> BILBO: Can you promise that I will come back?
>
> GANDALF: No, and if you do … you will not be the same.[14]

Like the epic fundraising ask, this "call to adventure" makes a clear challenge. It links the prospective hero's identity to that challenge. That challenge promises a victory. That victory promises an enhanced identity.

The Matrix "call to adventure"

Perhaps the most famous decision scene comes from *The Matrix*. The guiding sage Morpheus says,

> "This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill, and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes."[15]

The challenge is clear. Leave behind the ordinary world. Go on an adventure down the "rabbit-hole." It is urgent. ("This is your last chance.") It is a stark "yes" or "no" decision.

[14] *Id.*

[15] Wachowski, L. & Wachowski, A. (1997). *The Matrix screenplay.* [Screenplay]. Warner Brothers Entertainment.

But just before this challenge, Morpheus focuses on Neo's identity and life story. He says,

> "Let me tell you why you are here. You have come because you know something. What you know you can't explain but you feel it. You've felt it your whole life, felt that something is wrong with the world.... You are a slave, Neo. Like everyone else, you were born into bondage, kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind."[16]

Morpheus reveals Neo's identity as a life-long prisoner. This identity compels Neo to take the challenge. Unless he takes the challenge, his identity will not change.

The epic challenge elements

In each of these films, the guiding sage presents a heroic challenge. It is a stark "yes" or "no" choice. There is no "just a little bit" option.

Each challenge comes with a deadline. The threat or opportunity forces a choice. There is no "maybe someday" option.

The decision is clear. But the choice is not a matter of statistically analyzing pros and cons. It is a matter of identity. The guiding sage shows the identity elements (life story, people, and values) that

[16] *Id.*

support taking the challenge. The sage's message is this:

> "You are *the kind of person* who accepts a challenge like this."

The epic "call to adventure" links identity, challenge, and victory. The hero's identity compels him to accept the challenge (*Identity → Challenge*). The challenge promises a victory (*Challenge → Victory*). The victory is personally meaningful because of the hero's identity (*Victory → Identity*). The epic "call to adventure" includes the full story cycle. The compelling fundraising "ask" does the same.

The story cycle ask: Identity, challenge, and victory

The fundraising ask itself can verify each link in the story cycle.

Challenge
[1]↗ ↘[3]
Identity ← Victory
[2]

It can do this in just three sentences.

> [1] *Identity → Challenge* sentence
> "You have … [here describe a connection with the donor's identity]."
>
> [2] *Victory → Identity* sentence
> "You understand … [here describe how the victory would be meaningful to the donor]."

[3] *Challenge → Victory* sentence
"Would you consider a gift of $_____ to … [here describe the promised victory]?"[17]

This might sound like the following:

- [1] "You have changed so many lives through your support of our job training programs, just as your mother liked to say, 'Giving people a hand up, not a handout.'" (*Identity → Challenge*)

  [2] "You understand how this new technology center could provide real opportunities for young people who start out with nothing but a willingness to work hard, just like you did." (*Victory → Identity*)

  [3] "Would you consider a gift of $100,000 as one of our leadership-level donors to help transform our community in this way?" (*Challenge → Victory*)

- [1] "You have meant so much to this football program since your days as a player over thirty years ago." (*Identity → Challenge*)

  [2] "You understand how this new stadium expansion would launch our program onto the national stage." (*Victory → Identity*)

[17] Three sentences adapted from Collins, M. E. (2017, Winter). The Ask. *Advancing Philanthropy*, 16–23, p. 21. Quoting Marcy Heim. *See also,* Heim, M. (2018, August 22). *Wanna Do EVERYTHING Better?* [Website] http://marcyheim.com/wanna-do-everything-better

[3] "Would you consider a gift of $2 million to lead the campaign to make this a reality?" (*Challenge → Victory*)

- [1] "You have been so dedicated to improving the lives of patients at this hospital going back even before your own father received care here." (*Identity → Challenge*)

  [2] "You understand how this new 'Campaign against Cancer' can change the lives of so many right here in our community." (*Victory → Identity*)

  [3] "Would you consider a gift of $100,000 to help fund next year's screening clinics?" (*Challenge → Victory*)

- [1] "You have been well known in this community as an advocate for our youth summer camps." (*Identity → Challenge*)

  [2] "You understand how camp scholarships change the lives of young people, giving them a chance to learn and grow just as you did in your youth." (*Victory → Identity*)

  [3] "Would you consider a gift of $50,000 to create the Smith Family Permanent Endowed Scholarship Fund to give that opportunity to future generations of campers?" (*Challenge → Victory*)

These asks include the full story cycle. They link identity, challenge, and victory. This can make them deeply compelling.

The epic fundraising challenge: Heroic amount

How else does epic story inform practical fundraising? In story, the prospective hero faces a stark choice. It is a "yes" or "no" decision. In fundraising, this means asking for a specific amount.

But how much? In story, the heroic decision is difficult. The challenge is hard. In fundraising, a heroic donation is not a quick and easy choice. To make a meaningful story, the gift must be a meaningful amount. The heroic donation is a sacrificial gift. It is a "stretch" gift.

What is this number? Some charities have the research to estimate donor capacity. When the estimate is correct, the right number is simple. It's 100% of capacity. All hero stories require 100% of the hero's capacity.

But what if we have no idea? We could guess.[18] A major gift is typically ten to twenty-five times regular annual giving.[19] Or we might first share stories of others' gifts. This is a conversational way to

[18] We could ask for "your best gift ever." This has a floor of the donor's previous largest gift. However, always avoid asking for "at least" a certain amount. This language devalues the target amount.

[19] Panas, J. (2020). *Asking: A 59-minute guide to everything board members, volunteers, and staff must know to secure the gift.* Emerson & Church. p. 58.

introduce a gift menu. Each menu option has a price. A donor's reaction to the amounts can hint at what is possible.

Why not just leave it open? You might say,

"Give what you can. Anything helps."

But this doesn't work. It won't inspire a major gift. It doesn't work because it isn't a heroic challenge. It's begging. It's not a call to adventure. It's a call to convenience. It's a mundane choice in a mundane story. That story won't motivate a major gift.

The epic fundraising challenge: Heroic audience

The guiding sage can make the "call to adventure" alone. But, as in *The Hobbit*, it can help to have the right audience. Gandalf makes the final request at a dinner. The guests have already accepted the challenge. They share why they have done so.

This can work in fundraising too. Peers (or aspirational peers) who have already pledged are a great audience. As in *The Hobbit*, they can share why they have accepted the challenge. They can create a donor community of fellow adventurers.

The epic fundraising challenge: The guiding sage makes the ask

Audience members can help. But they do not make the ask. During the moment of the ask, the

audience role is to be present and be silent. As Holly Million explains,

> "At this time, the board member … should pretend to be deer caught in headlights. No motion, no comments. The temptation will be great to break the silence and reduce the awkwardness, but everyone needs to shut up."[20]

Coordinating this silence is important. Thus, "not having prearranged signals between solicitation members" can be a key roadblock to a successful ask.[21]

Making the ask is not the role of the fellow donor. It's the role of the guiding sage fundraiser. Delivering the compelling "call to adventure" requires experience and expertise.

Conclusion: Advance the donor's hero story

Knowing the full story cycle can lead to a better ask. It can also lead to a better follow-up. A "no" is not the end of the story. It's a normal step in the hero's journey. The "yes" often comes later.

And a "yes" is not the end of the story, either. The charity must still deliver a victory and enhanced identity. Otherwise, it's not finishing the story. That's an experience the donor is unlikely to repeat.

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[20] Million, H. (2006) *Fear-free fundraising: How to ask people for money*, Independently published: BookSurge Publishing. p. 87.

[21] Ciconte, B. L. & Jacob, J. G. (2009). *Fundraising basics: A complete guide*. Jones & Bartlett Learning. p. 168.

The “one big thing” in fundraising is to advance the donor’s hero story. That story requires a fundraising ask. It requires a “call to adventure.” The elements of the effective “call to adventure” are also the elements of the effective ask.

The ideal challenge links to the prospective hero’s past identity. The challenge promises a future victory. The promised victory results in an enhanced identity. It provides private meaning or public reputation.

The ideal challenge comes from the hero’s guiding sage. The sage challenges with a heroic choice. Who is this sage? It is Obi-Wan, Gandalf, Morpheus … and you!

14

CONFIRMING DONOR HEROISM WITH GRATITUDE: THE RETURN OF THE HERO

> "In myths the hero is the one who conquers the dragon, not the one who is devoured by it."
>
> – Carl Jung[1]

Monomyth resolution

In the universal hero story, the hero wins. The dragon is slain. The victory is won. But the story doesn't end there. One step remains: The hero returns.[2]

Joseph Campbell writes,

"the adventurer still must return with his life-transmitting trophy. The full round, the norm

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[1] Jung, C. (2014). The conjuction. In M. Adler, H. Fordham, and W. McGuire (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (2nd ed.) (20 vols). Princeton University Press. Volume VIII, para. 414.

[2] This *nóstos* or "homecoming" pattern is myriad in epic Greek literature, beginning with Homer's Odyssey. *See* Alexopoulou, M. (2003). *The homecoming (nóstos) pattern in Greek tragedy.* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Glasgow.

> of the monomyth, requires the hero should now begin the labour of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community ..."[3]

The story started in the hero's ordinary world. This shows his backstory. It shows his people and values. These are his sources of identity. The story ends in the same world. The hero returns.

But he returns as a different person. He started as a seemingly ordinary person in his ordinary world. He returns as a hero. He is

1. Meaningfully victorious, and
2. Personally transformed.

The final step in the hero story confirms this heroic status. It confirms his new identity. In the narrative arc, this is the story's resolution.

Monomyth resolution: Meaningfully victorious

The hero wins a victory. The final step confirms its meaning. It is meaningful because it benefits the hero's community. It benefits his people and values. It enhances his sources of identity.

[3] Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 193.

This confirmation can be internal. The hero can observe the impact of his victory. He can see the transformation to his original world.

This confirmation can also be external. Public acclaim for the victory confirms its meaningfulness. Gratitude affirms its impact.

Monomyth resolution: Personally transformed

The hero is also personally transformed. He is not the same person he was before. He has grown. His identity has been enhanced. This final step confirms it.

This confirmation can be internal. The return to his original world recalls his original self. This old image contrasts with his new one. It contrasts with his now-transformed self. This comparison highlights the personal transformation.

The confirmation can also be external. The hero is honored. Public admiration confirms his altered identity. Gratitude affirms his heroic transformation.

The hero's journey is an identity enhancement process.[4] It progresses through [5]

Original Identity → Challenge → Victory → Enhanced Identity

Or simply, [6]

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[4] For example, "this hero's journey corresponds to a process of individual development from a disjointed sense of identity to a consolidated identity, when the individual acquires a clear sense of aspiration in life"
Golban, T. (2014). *Rewriting the hero and the quest: myth and monomyth in Captain Corelli's Mandolin by Louis de Bernières.* Peter Lang GmbH. p. 34.
For an argument that the protagonist of the Bildungsroman – coming of age story or "the novel of identity formation" – is "at the same time the hero of the monomyth" *see* Karabakir, T., & Golban, P. (2019). The Bildungsroman as Monomythic fictional discourse: Identity formation and assertion in great expectations. *Humanitas: International Journal of Social Sciences, 7*(14), 318-336.
See also discussions in Elenbaas, J. D. (2016). *Excavating the mythic mind: Origins, collapse, and reconstruction of personal myth on the journey toward individuation.* [Ph.D. Dissertation]. Pacifica Graduate Institute; Gerhold, C. (2011). *The hero's journey through adolescence: A Jungian archetypal analysis of "Harry Potter".* [Ph.D. Dissertation]. The Chicago School of Professional Psychology.
[5] The monomyth includes specific steps. The hero,
1. Begins in the ordinary world
2. Is faced with a challenge (the call to adventure)
3. Rejects then accepts the call and enters the new world
4. Undergoes ordeals and overcomes an enemy
5. Gains a reward or transformation
6. Returns to the place of beginning with a gift to improve that world

This hero story progresses through
Original Identity [1] → Challenge [2, 3, 4] → Victory [4, 5] → Enhanced Identity [5, 6]
[6] Campbell uses a three-step circular illustration with this description:

> "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 28.
I label these steps as follows:
The beginning point of "the world of common day" is "**original identity**."

"Venturing forth into a region of supernatural wonder" is "**challenge**."
"Fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won" is "**victory**."

Challenge
↗ ↘
Identity ← Victory

The final step confirms the hero's enhanced identity.[7] It verifies his heroic status. He has become a

1. Meaningfully victorious, and
2. Personally transformed hero.

Monomyth resolution: Let's go to the movies

This isn't just academic theory. The highest grossing movie franchises are hero stories. The final scene often provides this resolution. It confirms the hero's enhanced identity.

This occurs in the original *Star Wars* film. The ending scene is one of public gratitude and honor. The heroes receive medals at a formal ceremony. Hundreds stand at attention. This also occurs in the final *Lord of the Rings* film. The ending scene is nearly identical. A massive audience bows to the heroes at a formal ceremony. Their transformation into heroes is publicly confirmed.

"the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" is "**enhanced identity**."
I apply this both to a scenario where the charitable gift serves as part of the final step in the heroic life story and where the gift request itself constitutes the challenge that promises a victory delivering enhanced identity.

[7] This enhanced identity can be as simple as external prestige or an internal "warm glow." However, it also touches on Jung's more nuanced journey of individuation.

In *The Hobbit*, the final scene is different. Here, the confirmation is private. Bilbo returns to his home and grows old. Then, he reflects on the memories of the adventure. (He has been changed.) He holds the ring: the spoils of victory. (He has been victorious.) By holding the ring, he protects the community. (The victory is meaningful.)

The scene ends with the arrival of the guiding-sage Gandalf. Gandalf can recall and confirm this heroic journey. He can do so now, privately. He can also do so for future generations, publicly. (Wizards live a very long time!)

Neo returns to the matrix in the final scene. This is the original world where the film began. But now he is transformed. He has acquired previously unimagined powers. These were won in his journey. This "trophy" now becomes a gift. It's a gift to benefit his original world. His closing words confirm it. He tells the defeated villain,

> "I'm going to show these people what you don't want them to see. I'm going to show them a world ... where anything is possible."[8]

These ending scenes verify the heroic status. The main character returns to the ordinary world. But he returns as a

1. Meaningfully victorious, and
2. Personally transformed hero.

[8] Wachowski, L. & Wachowski, A. (1997). *The Matrix screenplay.* [Screenplay]. Warner Brothers Entertainment.

Fundraising resolution

Hero stories from both mythic tradition and modern film agree. The final story step confirms the hero's new status. This is the story's resolution.

What about fundraising? Personal transformation might seem like a lofty goal for a donation. A meaningful victory that enhances identity might too. But these are just extreme versions of a simple idea.

The final step in the donation experience is a confirmation. It confirms the donor's positive identity. It confirms a positive *philanthropic* identity. This can come from two sources:

1. The *giving* of the gift

   The identity message is this: "I am a

   - Generous
   - Faithful
   - Prosperous
   - Committed

   member of the community."

2. The *impact* of the gift

   The identity message is this: "I am an

   - Effective

- Successful
- Victorious
- Valuable

member of the community."

The confirmation can be internal. Observing (or being reminded of) one's own giving or impact works. It causes "self-signaling."[9] It helps the donor internally confirm a positive identity. Acknowledging the gift can trigger this. So can reporting the gift's impact.

The confirmation can also be external. This comes from gratitude and publicity. Gratitude comes from beneficiaries or their representatives. It confirms the donor's positive identity. Effective publicity causes others to confirm this as well. In either case, outsiders confirm the donor's positive identity.

Gratitude for the act of giving

An effective "thank you" can work on two levels. First, it can recognize the *giving* of the gift. It

[9] Andreoni, J. & Serra-Garcia, M. (2019, December). *Time-inconsistent charitable giving.* NBER Working Paper No. 22824, https://www.nber.org/papers/w22824
("the pleasures experienced at the time of the giving decision may be re-experienced later when focus is brought to the giving decision, such as when the gift is transacted. Hence, spreading a single giving decision into two distinct social interactions is like giving a person a larger audience, even if the audience is the same people, and even if the audience is simply themselves (as with self-signaling).") *See also,* Andreoni, J., & Serra-Garcia, M. (2021). Time inconsistent charitable giving. *Journal of Public Economics, 198*, 104391.

can confirm that the donor accepted the challenge. But great gratitude goes further. It doesn't just acknowledge the gift. It confirms the donor's *positive identity* resulting from the act of giving. The donor is generous, faithful, and sacrificial. The donor is a committed member of the community.

This gratitude can start right away. It can start even before (or without)[10] any impact. This gratitude is not about impact. It's about the act of *giving* the gift.

Gratitude for the impact of giving

Gratitude can do more. It can also confirm the *impact* of the gift. But great gratitude goes even further. It confirms the donor's *positive identity* resulting from the impact of the gift. The donor is effective, successful, and victorious. The donor is a valuable member of the community.

Great gratitude can do a lot. It can confirm the full donor-hero story. First, it can confirm that the donor accepted a heroic *challenge*. This comes from the *making* of the gift. (It was a sacrificial gift in a moment of crisis or opportunity.) Second, gratitude

[10] Intentionally giving even without any possible impact is actually quite common in experimental studies. *See e.g.,* Crumpler, H., & Grossman, P. J. (2008). An experimental test of warm glow giving. *Journal of Public Economics, 92*(5), 1011-1021.
Offerings where the gift itself is destroyed are described in the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Pentateuch. *See* e.g., Genesis 35:14, Exodus 29:41, Leviticus 23:18; Petropoulou, A. (1987). The sacrifice of eumaeus reconsidered. *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies, 28*(2), 135-149; Strittmatter, E. J. (1925). Prayer in the Iliad and the Odyssey. *The Classical Weekly, 18*(11), 83-87.

can confirm that the donor won a meaningful *victory*. This comes from the *impact* of the gift. (It protected the donor's people and values.) In both ways, gratitude can confirm the donor's enhanced identity. (The donor is a generous, victorious hero.)

Gratitude: Research

Effective gratitude delivers value to the donor. This encourages the next gift. It also confirms a positive *philanthropic* identity. This helps too. Confirming this identity changes behavior. Afterward, people's actions will tend to match this identity. This also encourages the next gift.

Gratitude encourages the next gift. Research shows this.[11] One study examined 70,441 donations on a charitable crowdfunding platform. It found that a

> "successful donation result and 'Thank-You' feedback from fundraisers can significantly decrease [donors'] attrition rate." [12]

Gratitude also encourages fulfilling a gift pledge. Another experiment found,

> "If expressions of gratitude are then targeted to individuals who select into pledges, reneging

[11] S*ee, e.g.,* Merchant, A., Ford, J. B., & Sargeant, A. (2010). 'Don't forget to say thank you': The effect of an acknowledgement on donor relationships. *Journal of Marketing Management, 26*(7-8), 593-611

[12] Xiao, S., & Yue, Q. (2021). The role you play, the life you have: Donor retention in online charitable crowdfunding platform. *Decision Support Systems, 140*, 113427.

can be significantly reduced and contributions significantly increased."[13]

Gratitude quality: Research

A "thank you" can work. But the effects depend on the content of the "thank you."[14] One experiment varied this message. Students called donors to a university's fundraising campaign. The script included details on the campaign goals and impact.[15] It included a personal "thank you." A second version was almost the same. But it had one difference. It added two sentences:

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[13] Andreoni, J., & Serra-Garcia, M. (2021). The pledging puzzle: How can revocable promises increase charitable giving? *Management Science, 67*(10), 4969-6627.

[14] Is it possible for a "thank-you" to be so poor that it doesn't help? Probably so. One experiment tested this type of "worst case" scenario. In this experiment, the generic "thank-you" calls were not from the charity. They were from an outside telemarketing firm. Also, they were not made until about six months after the gift. Rather than warm, personal, social language, the calls used phrases like,

> "This call may be monitored or recorded for quality assurance," and "If you have any questions regarding your donation, please call member services"

Although donations were still higher among those who actually received the calls than those who didn't, the overall effect for being on the list of those who were at risk of potentially being contacted in the experiment was not statistically significant. *See*, Samek, A. & Longfield, C. (2019, April 13) *Do thank-you calls increase charitable giving? Expert forecasts and field experimental evidence*. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3371327

[15] "I'm calling to thank you for your gift of [Last Gift Amount] to the Appalachian Fund for our iBackAPP Day efforts! Your participation helped us exceed our 2,500 donor goal for iBackAPP Day and you're helping make a difference on our campus by providing money for scholarships, student mentoring, faculty research, and other areas of greatest need at Appalachian. As a current student, I want to personally say thank you for making a difference in my collegiate experience!" Dwyer, P. (2020). Gratitude and fundraising: Does putting the 'you' in thank you promote giving? [online video]. *2020 Science of Philanthropy Initiative Conference*, https://iu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/1_oz1cxzxn at 3:46

> "You went out of your way to support us, and we want you to know how much we appreciate you. Basically, we think you're great."[16]

This addition nearly doubled the likelihood of later gifts.[17] The added lines did something special. They specifically confirmed the donor's *positive identity*.

Conclusion

Great gratitude includes gratitude for a gift (accepted a heroic challenge). It includes gratitude for an impact (won a heroic victory). But ultimately, it's not just gratitude for what the donor did. It's gratitude for who the donor is. It's not just *transaction* gratitude ("You did a good thing"). It's *relationship* gratitude ("You are a good person"). It's gratitude that confirms an enhanced identity.

Great gratitude confirms the full donor-hero story. It confirms an accepted challenge. It confirms a meaningful victory. It confirms an enhanced identity. It's the "resolution" step in the donor's hero story.

[16] *Id.* at 3:58.

[17] *Id.* at 4:54. [Note this difference arose only for actual phone conversations, not for voicemails.]

15

DONOR PUBLICITY AND DONOR HESITANCY: THE HERO'S INITIAL REFUSAL TO RETURN

Monomyth ending

The universal hero story (monomyth) ends with the hero's return. The hero returns to his original world. The return confirms his new heroic status. It confirms his new identity.

This often happens in an ending scene of public acclaim. For example, the original *Star Wars* film ends this way. So does the final *Lord of the Rings* film. So does *The Lion King*. And *Shrek*. And *Moana*. And *The Karate Kid*. And *Rocky*. And on and on.

Fundraising: Publicity risk and reward

In fundraising, publicity can lead to public acclaim. It can lead others to confirm the donor's positive identity. It can even confirm the donor's heroic status.

Building the right message can help. So can building the right audience. For example, a community of fellow supporters can be a great audience. They're more likely to appreciate and admire the donor's gift and impact.

Good publicity can deliver the ultimate donor experience. But for many donors, it can be scary. It's scary because it can go wrong.

Publicity can be risky for the donor's story. The audience may not be supportive. They can reject the positive identity claim. They can dismiss the donor's hero story. They can view the publicity as the *motivation* for the gift. This makes the gift a self-interested transaction. Such a gift doesn't reflect generosity. It's not sacrificial. It can't be heroic. These challenges can destroy the donor's story.

Yet, publicity can be helpful. It can confirm the donor's positive identity. It can confirm the donor's hero story. It can massively increase the value of the donor's experience. But it's also risky. It can lead to rejection. This can be scary for the donor.

Delivering this story ending is powerful. But it can come with a barrier. It can require overcoming donor hesitancy. How do we do this? How do we overcome the donor's fears? The answers appear in the monomyth itself.

Monomyth: The refusal of the return

In the monomyth, the hero returns. He is now personally transformed and meaningfully victorious.[1] The return confirms the hero's new status. Often, the hero returns to public acclaim.

But the return of the hero isn't simple. In its classic form, it's a sequence of six stages.[2] Stage one might surprise you. It's

"1. The Refusal of the Return."[3]

Why would the hero refuse to return? Because the return can be intimidating. The original world might reject the hero. It might not accept his victory

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[1] This is confirmed in the final steps of the hero's return: "5. Master of the Two Worlds" and "6. Freedom to Live." Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. viii

[2] These are:

1. Refusal of the Return
2. The Magic Flight
3. Rescue from Without
4. The Crossing of the Return Threshold
5. Master of the Two Worlds
6. Freedom to Live

Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. viii

When looking at these, and other components of the monomyth, it is important to keep in mind that these are general descriptors of a cycle. They will not always appear. They are not mandatory, fixed, sequential steps. Campbell (p. 228) explains,

> "Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle (test motif, flight motif, abduction of the bride), others string a number of independent cycles into a single series (as in the Odyssey). Differing characters or episodes can become fused, or a single element can reduplicate itself and reappear under many changes."

[3] Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. viii

as meaningful. It might not see his transformation as positive or real.

The prospect of the return is risky. The original world might reject the hero's enhanced identity. In Jung's work, this enhanced identity is called "individuation."[4] One researcher explains,

> "the loss of the personal individuation that had been achieved is a driving fear for the hero in his Return to the known world."[5]

The hero resists returning to the original world. The return subjects him to public scrutiny. It could lead to public acclaim. Or not. It might instead lead to public dismissal or derision. It's risky.

These same risks arise in a donor's fear of publicity. The donor may have had a good experience without publicity. He may have felt an internal identity enhancement. The gift may have been personally meaningful. But once it's made public, others may reject the meaningfulness of the gift. They can spoil the positive identity experience.

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[4] Individuation "denotes the process by which a person becomes a psychological 'in-dividual,' that is, a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole.'" Jung, C. G. (1990). The archetypes and the collective unconscious. In H. Read, M. Fordham & G. Adler (Eds.), R.F.C. Hull (Trans.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung.* Vol 9 (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 275.

[5] "Campbell explicitly brings up individuation as he is discussing the return of the hero: the loss of the personal individuation that had been achieved is a driving fear for the hero in his Return to the known world." Butchart, L. (2019). "What man am I?" The Hero's Journey, the beginning of individuation, and Taran Wanderer. *Mythlore*, 38(135), 199-218. p. 207.

Publicity risks rejection. It risks "the loss of the personal individuation that had been achieved." It risks a negative reframing of the donor's story. It can be scary.

Monomyth: Reframing the return

The hero initially resists the return. How is this overcome? First, the return is not framed as a way to gain acclamation. Rather, it is a necessary burden for the hero. The return is *not* an act of selfishness. Instead, it requires *overcoming* selfishness.

One scholar writes,

> "Possessing the boon is not an end for the hero; it is the beginning of another stage. The boon is a 'life-transmuting trophy' so the hero must return home 'where the boon may redound to the renewing of his community or the whole world' (Campbell 2004, 179). Similar to the refusal of the call, this responsibility is also often refused by the hero as he is too selfish to use the boon for others' good, he does not want to leave the pleasures that this new world offers …"[6]

[6] Zorba, M. G. (2019). A study on Frodo's quest within the framework of Joseph Campbell's monomyth. *Mediterranean Journal of Humanities, 9*(1), 401-416. p. 412.

Joseph Campbell explains the risks of the hero's return. He writes,

> "As dreams that were momentous by night may seem simply silly in the light of day, so the poet and the prophet can discover themselves playing the idiot before a jury of sober eyes. The easy thing is to commit the whole community to the devil and retire again into the heavenly rock-dwelling, close the door, and make it fast." [7]

It would be more comfortable never to return. But it wouldn't be heroic.

Fundraising: Reframing publicity

In the monomyth, the hero's return results in public acclaim. But it's framed as a sacrifice. A donor conversation can use this same framing. For example,

> "I understand public recognition can be uncomfortable for you. But we've found it sets a powerful example that influences others. Allowing us to share your story could inspire other gifts. Think of it like giving a second gift. It could really make a big difference."

Another fundraiser suggests,

> "Thank you so much for bearing with me. One last thing – stories of generosity tend to encourage others to be more generous. It

[7] Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 202

would be an honor to publicize your gift to inspire others. Would that be ok?" [8]

Publicity can deliver a powerful experience for the donor. But the motivation shouldn't be framed as selfish. Instead, the motivation is sacrifice. Allowing publicity is another gift from the donor. It's the gift of setting a powerful example. It's a gift that helps the charity. It's a gift that benefits the donor's people and values.

Monomyth: Automatic return

In the monomyth, how does the hero return? One way is "2. The Magic Flight."[9] Here, the hero is forced to return. He's being chased. (The temporarily beaten enemy is none too happy!) There is no place else to go. The hero must escape back to the original world.

Another way is "3. Rescue from Without."[10] Here, the hero's return becomes automatic. He might be given safe and quick passage by those in the new world.[11] Or those in the original world may come and get him.[12]

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[8] Shuba, J. J. (2020, October). *Navigating planned gift conversations with your donors*. [Paper presentation]. Charitable Gift Planning Conference, online. p. 2.
[9] Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. viii
[10] *Id.*
[11] "The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight)." *Id.* p. 228.
[12] "The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him." *Id*. p. 192.

Thus, the hero's return is either

- Compulsory ("2. The Magic Flight"), or
- Automatic ("3. Rescue from Without").

Either through outside force or outside aid, the hero returns. He moves to the next stage,

"4. The Crossing of the Return Threshold."[13]

He returns to the original "real" world.

Fundraising: Automatic publicity

In fundraising, publicity pushes the donor's hero story into the "real" world. It can be scary. But it's also important. It can dramatically improve the donor's experience. So, overcoming donor hesitancy is important.

One way to do this is to make publicity feel automatic. It can feel expected, normal, almost mandatory. Of course, an adamant donor could still opt out.[14] But opting out shouldn't be highlighted, suggested, or even easy. It should trigger resistance. It should lead to conversations. These can be

[13] *Id.* p. viii.

[14] One study explored the effects of alerting online donors that a thank you message would be posted on the donor's personal Facebook walls. Doing so increased donations overall. But for less extroverted people (lower "need for social approval"), this announcement reduced their donations. Another approach worked better: making the thank you automatic but allowing for opting out. That approach increased donations for both groups. *See* Study 1 & Study 2 in Denis, E., Pecheux, C., & Warlop, L. (2020). When public recognition inhibits prosocial behavior: The case of charitable giving. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 49*(5), 951-968.

ostensibly to confirm, but also to counsel against, opting out.

Experiments have tested this. Making publicity mandatory, rather than voluntary, works.[15] It increases volunteering and donations. Researchers explain,

> "Making the publicity of a pro-social behavior mandatory instead of voluntary … makes people more willing to both help and to spread word about the charitable cause, and facilitates a win-win situation among contributors, charity organizations, and their recipients." [16]

In practice, publicity should be routine and automatic. It should be a normal part of the fundraising process. A donor should never have to ask. Asking for publicity ruins the donor-hero story. Even admitting that publicity is a motivation is anti-heroic.[17] Publicity can still be an important part of the

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[15] Yang, A., & Hsee, C. (2017). Promoting conspicuous generosity: Justifying the "brag" by removing the choice. *Advances in Consumer Research - North American, 45,* 70-71.
https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/v45/acr_vol45_1024800.pdf

[16] In one study, researchers explained,

> "We show that … "brag-binding", i.e, making the publicity of a pro-social behavior mandatory instead of voluntary, can … motivate people to engage in conspicuous prosocial behaviors … In sum, by removing contributors' choice about whether to brag and justifying their prospective conspicuous prosocial behavior, "brag-binding" makes people more willing to both help and to spread word about the charitable cause, and facilitates a win-win situation among contributors, charity organizations, and their recipients."

Id. p. 70-71.

[17] This is one of the reasons why publicity will rarely be reported by donors as a motivation for the gift. Such reports should not be taken at face value. Across social science research it is well documented that self-reports of motivations will suffer from "social desirability bias." People will tend to

story. It just needs to be automatic not demanded, or even requested. Another study found,

> "When public recognition is saliently imposed (not requested), donation likelihood increases, suggesting that donors' potential concerns about observers' suspicion of their true motives is reduced." [18]

The monomyth hero often hesitates to return. So, too, the donor hero may hesitate to bring his story into the open. This donor hesitancy can be overcome.

Elements from the monomyth can help. Publicity can be reframed as unselfish and heroic. It can become "magically" automatic.

Monomyth: The ending is vital

The hero story ends with admiration. It ends with a confirmation of heroism. This confirmation isn't just an add-on. It's an essential part of the story.

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report the most socially acceptable motivations for their actions. This bias is not simply from respondents trying to look good to the person asking the question. It is also about respondents trying to look good to themselves. *See* Brenner, P. S., & DeLamater, J. (2016). Lies, damned lies, and survey self-reports? Identity as a cause of measurement bias. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 79*(4), 333-354. Thus, we should expect that few donors will admit to being motivated by any apparently self-interested benefits such as publicity or tax deductions. However, fundraisers who take such reports at face value will have a mistaken impression of reality. Nevertheless, donors' self-reported motivations are still valuable. This reveals that, although publicity and tax deductions may be highly motivational, they should never be described as *the motivation* for a gift. Doing so is not socially acceptable. It undermines the pro-social nature of the gift. It ruins the story of the gift.

[18] See Study 3 in Demis, E., Pecheux, C., & Warlop, L. (2020). When public recognition inhibits prosocial behavior: The case of charitable giving. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 49*(5), 951-968.

It's even in the definition for "hero." Merriam-Webster's definitions for "hero"[19] include,

> "A person admired for achievements and noble qualities," and
>
> "An object of extreme admiration and devotion."

A hero whom no one admires isn't much of a hero. Admiration is important. It's important to the hero story. And it's important to *the donor's* hero story.

Fundraising: The ending is vital

In fundraising, donor admiration can come from different sources. It can come from beneficiaries or their representatives. This is gratitude. It can come from other appreciative audiences. This is effective publicity. Gratitude and publicity are key parts of the story.

But they're also key parts of *the next* story. The ending of one donation story is the beginning of the next. Publicity can encourage the next step. This is true whether that next step is the next gift or fulfilling a previous pledge.

Fundraiser Anne Melvin explains,

> "every time I got a new pledge, I added (after my 'thank you!') 'Can I let other supporters of

[19] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hero

> Wellesley know you'll be supporting the Wellesley Scholarship Foundation?' Not only did I get a yes, but I increased my chance of turning the pledge into a gift by letting the pledgor know that her gift would be public."[20]

Conclusion: The ending is vital

The return of the hero is the end of the monomyth story. Gratitude and publicity are the end of the fundraising story. Both confirm an enhanced identity.

But in fundraising, this ending is also a beginning. It's the beginning of the next story. Confirming heroism (or some other positive identity) enhances the donation experience. It delivers real value to the donor. This encourages the next gift. Keeping the donor starts by finishing the story.

[20] Melvin, A. T. (2014, October). *The art (and science) of persuasion*. [Paper presentation]. National Conference for Philanthropic Planning, Anaheim, CA. p. 9.

16

Why Story?
The Narrative Arc in Practical Fundraising

Monomyth steps

The "one big thing" in fundraising is always the same: Advance the donor's hero story.

The universal hero story, called the monomyth, includes specific steps. The hero,

1. Begins in the ordinary world
2. Is faced with a challenge (the call to adventure)
3. Rejects then accepts the call and enters the new world
4. Undergoes ordeals and overcomes an enemy
5. Gains a reward or transformation, and
6. Returns to the place of beginning with a gift to improve that world.

This hero story progresses through

Original Identity [1] → **Challenge** [2, 3, 4] → **Victory** [4, 5] → **Enhanced Identity** [5, 6]

In three words, the monomyth cycle is:[1]

Challenge
↗ ↘
Identity ← **Victory**

The compelling donor experience will include each step. The compelling fundraising challenge will make each link.

Narrative steps

This is a specific story. It has specific steps. But it's just one example of the usual steps in story. All story uses a narrative arc. This typically includes

- Backstory
- Setting

[1] Campbell uses a three-step circular illustration with this description:

> "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Campbell, J. (1949/2004). *The hero with a thousand faces* (commemorative ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 28.

I label these steps as follows:

The beginning point of "the world of common day" is "**original identity**."

"Venturing forth into a region of supernatural wonder" is "**challenge**."

"Fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won" is "**victory**."

"The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" is "**enhanced identity**."

I apply this both to a scenario where the charitable gift serves as part of the final step in the heroic life story and where the gift request itself constitutes the challenge that promises a victory delivering enhanced identity.

- Inciting incident
- Climax, and
- Resolution.

Advancing *any* story means progressing through this narrative arc. In the donor's hero story, each step has a specific purpose:

- The backstory connects the donor's *original identity* with the cause, organization, beneficiaries, or project.
- The setting prepares the donor for the *challenge*. It promotes personal and social norms supporting a heroic response.
- The inciting incident is the *challenge*. It forces a choice with the promise of *victory* in response to a crisis (threat or opportunity).
- The climax delivers the promised *victory*.
- The resolution confirms the donor's *enhanced identity* resulting from the *victory*.

The donor's hero story is a story. It's a specific application of the narrative arc.

Why story?

Why is this series so focused on story? It seems like a lot to go through. I mean, that's a lot of steps. Why not just learn the best phrase to make the ask and get on with the asking? Or why not just collect a list of fundraising tips and tricks?

There's a reason. Story is powerful. Story is how humans are wired. Story works. Focusing on one phrase or one step is interesting, but these don't work by themselves. They work only as part of a story.

What are we doing, anyway?

What's the difference between good and bad fundraising? That's easy, right? Good fundraising brings in big money. Bad fundraising doesn't.

The problem with this definition becomes obvious when we apply it to other jobs. A good football player brings in big money. So does a good lawyer. Or a good comedian. Money is a *result* of being good at these jobs. But it's not a *definition* for being good at any of them.

Why do these top people get big money? Because they *provide value*. We live in a choice economy, not a command economy. Big money comes by providing big value. Other professions provide value in different ways. What about fundraising?

A charity can provide value to many people in many ways. But *fundraising* provides value *to the donor* in just one way: identity enhancement. This identity might be internal, private, and transcendent.[2]

[2] This discussion will focus on identity enhancement in its most basic form. This can be as simple as, for example, "I feel better about myself after I give."

It might be external, public, and commercial. But identity enhancement is always the ultimate benefit to the donor.

Story works for the donor

The right goal is to provide value to the donor. Fundraising provides this value through an enhanced identity. That's the right goal. What's the right process? It starts with story. Story is natural. It's memorable. It's compelling.

One study analyzed over 5,000 cancer-related campaigns on GoFundMe.[3] Those using a story metaphor, either a journey or a battle, attracted 15% more donors and 11% larger donations.

Story works. What works even better is deeply embedded, primal, archetypal story. Among these archetypal stories, one is best suited to compel major, transformational gifts. It's the hero story. The right

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However, this actually touches on the substantially more complex journey of individuation. Individuation "denotes the process by which a person becomes a psychological 'in-dividual,' that is, a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole.' Jung, C. G. (1990). The archetypes and the collective unconscious. In H. Read, M. Fordham & G. Adler (Eds.), R.F.C. Hull (Trans.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung.* Vol 9 (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press. p. 275.

[3] This study examined data from more than 5,000 Go-FundMe cancer-related campaigns. It found,

> "The results suggest that campaigns that use at least one metaphor family—regardless of whether it is a journey or battle—attract about 15% more donors and about 11% larger average donations." (p. 2571)

Liebscher, A., Trott, S., & Bergen, B. (2020). Effects of battle and journey metaphors on charitable donations for cancer patients. *Proceedings for the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society (July 29- August 1, 2020),* online. https://cogsci.mindmodeling.org/2020/papers/0613/0613.pdf

process to deliver enhanced identity is this: Advance the donor's hero story. When the donor experience delivers this narrative arc, it provides real value.

In fundraising, story works to motivate the donor. But it also works for the fundraiser.

Story works for the fundraiser

Story works. It doesn't work only for the donor. It also works for the fundraiser. Ask a typical person to explain these steps:

- Identification
- Cultivation
- Solicitation
- Recognition
- Stewardship

You'll likely get a blank stare. These insider terms aren't natural. They aren't memorable. They aren't intuitive.

But people intuitively understand story. We can convert these steps into story.

- Backstory *[Identification]*
- Setting *[Cultivation]*
- Inciting incident *[Solicitation]*
- Climax *[Recognition]*
- Resolution *[Stewardship]*

The steps may be the same, but now they're made into a story. This helps because we know, intuitively, when a story works. We also know when it doesn't. Read any novel. Watch any movie. You'll be able to answer these questions:

- Did this backstory and setting make me care about the characters?
- Did the inciting incident present a compelling choice?
- Did the resulting journey lead to a successful climax?
- Did the story end with a satisfying resolution?

This intuitive guidance disappears when we instead use technical words.

- How is your identification and cultivation?
- How is your solicitation?
- How is your recognition?
- How is your stewardship?

Now, we've lost the intuition of what we're trying to accomplish. These words aren't wrong, but they have little qualitative feeling. This can cause problems. It can lead to a superficial, check-the-box approach. It can even lead to skipping steps entirely.

Including each step makes the story complete. This also helps appeal to the widest range of donors.

Some may be more focused on the victory step (impact on others). Some may be more compelled by the enhanced identity step (a form of personal benefit). In experiments, these two message types appealed to different donors[4] in different circumstances.[5] But a complete story includes both elements. It connects with more donors.

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[4] Different people respond more strongly to messages of impact [victory] and benefit [enhanced identity]. One study reported this:

> "In the self-interest treatment it was stated that '[r]esearch by psychologists shows that donating money to charity increases the happiness and wellbeing of the giver'. In the altruism treatment it was stated that '[a]ny donation you make will improve the happiness and wellbeing of an African family' … materialists in the self-interest treatment give more than materialists in the pure altruism treatment; for non-materialists the reverse is true."

Fielding, D., Knowles, S., & Robertson, K. (2020). Materialists and altruists in a charitable donation experiment. *Oxford Economic Papers, 72*(1), 216-234. p. 221-222.

[5] These preferences for one of the two story elements (victory or enhanced identity) differ not only across people, but under different circumstances. In other words, these preferences are not fixed. For example, inducing feelings of social exclusion makes people more interested in benefitting others (i.e., becoming more valuable to others), rather than themselves. Inducing feelings of social exclusion (by playing a multi-player video game of catch where the participant was gradually excluded) decreased the persuasiveness rating for imagining how a donation would "Bring more fulfillment to your life" and increased the rating for "Enhance the lives of those suffering from hunger." Inducing feelings of social exclusion (by having participants recall life events where they experienced social exclusion) slightly decreased giving to cancer research advertisement with headlines of "Save your life" and "Protect your future" but doubled giving to those with headlines of "Save people's lives" and "Protect the well-being of others." This also decreased giving intentions for "Make yourself feed good by donating!" but increased giving intentions for "Bring clean water to people in need by donating!" Baek, T. H., Yoon, S., Kim, S., & Kim, Y. (2019). Social exclusion influences on the effectiveness of altruistic versus egoistic appeals in charitable advertising. *Marketing Letters, 30*(1), 75-90.

Thus, different people (Fielding, et al, 2000) in different circumstances (Baek, et al., 2019) may be more attracted to the impact ["victory"] portion of the story or the self-benefit ["enhanced identity"] portion of the story. Telling a complete story [identity → challenge → victory → enhanced identity] ensures that both portions are included.

Fielding, D., Knowles, S., & Robertson, K. (2020). Materialists and altruists in a charitable donation experiment. *Oxford Economic Papers, 72*(1), 216-234.

Story is memorable

Getting a list of facts, figures, tips, and tactics is great. We can understand. We can nod our heads. But when we get up the next morning, how much do we remember? Humans remember through stories.

In memory competitions, people memorize a sheet of random numbers. How do they do this? They do it by converting the numbers into stories.

In advance, they connect each two-digit sequence with a person, an action, and an object.[6] That makes every six-digit sequence a unique story image. A page of numbers becomes a journey through these story images. Humans can't remember a page of numbers by itself. But they can remember a set of stories.

Ancient humans looked up at an endless array of stars. Their response? Turn these countless dots into story characters. This is Orion the hunter. This is Leo the Lion or Taurus the Bull. Now they could remember and reference each dot with ease.

Character works better than commands

Story is easier to remember. It's also easier to execute. In fundraising, story works better than a list

[6] Foer, J. (2012). *Moonwalking with Einstein: The art and science of remembering everything.* Penguin Books.

of tips and tactics. This is because character works better than a set of commands.

Suppose we told a singer to perform a song as Elvis. Instantly, the singer knows,

- How to sound
- How to move
- What to wear, and
- What phrases to say.

But what if the singer had never heard of Elvis? How many instructions would this take? A lot! And even then, the performance still wouldn't work as well.

Advancing the donor's hero story gives the fundraiser an intuitive character role.[7] The guiding sage challenges the prospective hero with a choice.

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[7] John McLoughlin outlines the characteristics that are needed for an effective explanatory framework for major gifts fundraising. He writes,

> "I suggest that an explanatory framework for understanding the "major giving" interaction will need the following characteristics:
> 1. Be explanatory rather than simply being a list of tactics or techniques for success;
> 2. Be consistent with findings of research;
> 3. Be comprehensible and recognisable, as well as useful to the actors – fundraisers, philanthropists, advisers and (in the case of fundraisers) their managers and leaders; and
> 4. Be compatible with the complexity of processes that may be at work in the philanthropic interaction"

Mc Loughlin, J. (2017). Advantage, meaning, and pleasure: Reframing the interaction between major-gift fundraisers and philanthropists. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 22*(4), e1600. p. 1-2.

The fundraiser's role as the guiding sage within the donor's hero story (monomyth) context provides an intuitive framework that meets each of these tests.

This is an archetypal character. Your favorite version might be Obi-Wan Kenobi, Minerva McGonagall, Gandalf the Grey, Morpheus, Mr. Miyagi, or someone else. Imagining a character provides better intuitive guidance than a set of rules. It's not just a change in what we are doing. It's a change in who we are being.[8] It's an existential change.[9]

Once a fundraiser is *being* a character, adapting to new situations becomes easier. Is it OK to disappear after making the compelling ask? Obi-Wan Kenobi wouldn't. Should we guide the donor to another specialist advisor? Obi-Wan sent Luke to Yoda. Morpheus sent Neo to the Oracle. We know what actions fit because we know the character.

Conclusion

Fundraising isn't about knowing the right term. It's not about passing a quiz. It's about executing in the real world. Execution can involve using specific phrases and asking specific questions. But the questions don't work unless we know where we're going.

This is where story becomes powerful. Story makes effective fundraising natural. It makes it memorable. It makes it intuitive.

[8] Bassoff, M. & Chandler, S. (2001). *RelationShift: Revolutionary fundraising*. Robert D. Reed Publishers. p. 1.

[9] Breeze, B. (2017). *The new fundraisers*. Policy Press. p. 118.

Ultimately, effective fundraising is about delivering value. Story can do that. It not only helps *get* the big gift. It also helps deliver a donor experience *worth* that gift.

17

STORY PROBLEMS WITH FUNDRAISING METRICS: UR DOING IT WRONG

Fightin' words

Want to start a fight in a fundraising comment section? That's easy. Start talking metrics. Opinions are often passionate. And they often conflict. One author explains why 26 metrics are "essential."[1] Another writes,

> "Fundraisers need to focus MORE on creating memories and moments with their donors … and LESS about hitting those wacky metrics or year-end goals."[2]

[1] DonorSearch. (2015, October 13). *Nonprofit fundraising metrics: 26 essential KPIs to track.* [Website]. DonorSearch https://www.donorsearch.net/nonprofit-fundraising-metrics/

[2] Provenzano, S. (2021, February). [LinkedIn post]. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/samprovenzano_fundraising-repost-philanthropy-activity-6767134914912538624-zLy1

Another questions,

> "If philanthropy is all about relationships, then why do metrics only measure money?"[3]

So, what's the answer? Is it "all about the Benjamins?" Or is it "all about the love?"

Can't we all just get along?

Consider for a moment another alternative. What if both sides were correct? They disagree. Strongly. But maybe the problem is this: Maybe they're talking about *different* things.

Yes, they're all talking about fundraising. But fundraising isn't one thing. It's different things. It's different things with different – sometimes opposite – rules.

A business explanation: Big sales v. small sales

Fundraising is like a business that sells toothpicks AND aircraft carriers – *at the same time*. Would you like to buy a new wing for your local hospital? How about a mosquito net? Maybe a chicken or a heifer? Or perhaps endow a world-class engineering school? It's all fundraising.

[3] Hodge, J. (2012). *If philanthropy is all about relationships, then why do metrics only measure money?* [Paper presentation]. https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/6058

Here's the problem. Even in the business world, small sales and large sales aren't the same. Small sales are about quick, superficial transactions. Large sales require longer, deeper, more consultative relationships.[4] The field of large sales is called Key or Strategic Account Management. These big-ticket processes are different than traditional small-ticket sales.

A job explanation: Big sales v. small sales

One researcher states bluntly,

> "The objectives of salespeople are the opposite of the objectives of Strategic Account Managers."[5]

In fact, moving between these two jobs can be difficult. He explains,

> "Salespeople who remain strictly focused on sales instead of customers (i.e., seeking to close short-term deals or working only to reach their monthly targets or their quota) might show a propensity to fail as future Strategic Account

[4] *See* Rackham, N. (1988). *SPIN selling.* McGraw-Hill. *See also,* Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers – a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 38*(1), 92-122. ("… consultative-selling skills ('offering their advice to help customers solve their problems,' according to Agnihotri, Rapp and Trainor (2009, 474)) should be considered a prerequisite for creativity and intrapreneurial abilities, defined as "involving the sales professional as a valued advisor and viewing him as an industry expert" by Liu and Leach (2001, 147) … Thus, salespeople with advanced consultative selling skills might consider moving to a Strategic Account Management position.")

[5] Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers-a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 38*(1), 92-122.

Managers .... If they have a short-term selling approach, then they most likely should not attempt to transition to Strategic Account Management."[6]

An organizational explanation: Big sales v. small sales

This isn't just an individual conflict. It can be an organizational conflict. Not all sales organizations can succeed in the world of *big-ticket* sales. One study looked at why.[7] Failure in big-ticket Strategic Account Management often came from the following:

- "Failure to differentiate between, 'The opposing philosophies of traditional sales and account management.'
- Focusing on short-term financial numbers rather than customer need and value creation.
- Senior management resists giving influence or control to customers."

Now, replace the word "customer" with the word "donor." Voila! We've got the fundraiser metrics fight.[8] Traditional sales isn't wrong. Strategic

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[6] *Id.*

[7] Wilson, K., & Woodburn, D. (2014). The impact of organisational context on the failure of key and strategic account management programmes. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 29*(5), 353-363.

[8] The parallels go further. Much of what works in major donor fundraising is replicated in best practices in Key/Strategic Account Management. For example, one study defined successful Strategic Account Management programs using the following scale. (Replace "strategic accounts" with "major donors" and these are also ideal practices for major gifts fundraising success.)

"1. We always review the results of our solution with strategic accounts.

Account Management isn't either. They're just designed to succeed at two *opposite* ends of the market.

A storytelling explanation

The "one big thing" in fundraising is always the same: Advance the donor's hero story. So, let's talk storytelling. Suppose instead of managing fundraisers, we were managing writers.

First, suppose we're managing a group of novel writers. Does it make sense to manage their daily work based upon their daily sales? What about weekly? Quarterly? Of course not. That would be silly.

Writing a novel takes a long time. The money comes in much, much later. Yes, we'll eventually see who sells and who doesn't. Sales are still important. But they aren't helpful as a short-term metric to guide behavior.

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2. When we lose a strategic account, we always know the reasons why.
3. We jointly set long-term objectives with our strategic accounts.
4. We have relationships and dialog at the highest executive levels with all our strategic accounts.
5. We regularly engage our strategic accounts in our product/service planning process.
6. Our salespeople are definitely effective at producing year-over-year revenue growth from existing customers.
7. Specific criteria have been established to define a strategic account in our company."

Sullivan, U. Y., Peterson, R. M., & Krishnan, V. (2012). Value creation and firm sales performance: The mediating roles of strategic account management and relationship perception. *Industrial Marketing Management, 41*(1), 166-173. p. 172.

Now, suppose we're managing a group of social media "influencers." They write Twitter posts. Does it make sense to manage their daily work based upon their daily views? Weekly? Quarterly? Yes, that makes perfect sense. We can instantly compare posts that worked with those that didn't. We can coach, track, celebrate success, and identify failure.

But here's the problem. The social media manager then shares the best metrics for managing "writers" and their "output." He puts out rules for managing with daily, weekly, and quarterly data. He describes the most effective "writing." It's about making short, extreme, provocative statements. And he's right.

The manager of novel writers reads this. He responds, "This is nonsense. That's not what works in writing! You can't manage writers that way." And he's right, too.

Each manager holds opposite views on how to manage writers. And they're both correct. How? Because "writing" isn't just one thing. Like "fundraising," one word describes different things. They're both right because they're talking about *different* things.

Basic realities for fundraising metrics

I've argued for peace and understanding. Now, let me join the fight. In fundraising, the *important* issue is managing for *large* gifts. Why?

First, this is true because small gift metrics are easy. Results are quick. If you constantly A-B test, you'll eventually get there. You probably don't even need academic theory (or a professor like me). Darwin will figure it out for you.

Second, this is true because small gifts don't matter that much. Fundraising doesn't live in an 80/20 world. It's more like an 80/3 world. An analysis of 3,576 charities found, "76% of gifts come from 3% of donors."[9] Less than one fourth of the money comes from donations under $5,000.[10] For legacy gifts, it's even more extreme. Most charitable dollars come from 0.1% of decedents.[11]

So, I'm not going to disagree with small-gift metrics. I'm going to disagree with applying them to

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[9] Levis, Bill (February 5, 2015). *The 80/20 Rule is alive and well in fundraising.* Association of Fundraising Professionals. http://afpfep.org/blog/8020-rule-alive-well-fundraising/

[10] Amperage Fundraising. (n.d.). *The new 80/20 rule for fundraising.* (referencing Fundraising Effectiveness Project Data). https://www.amperagefundraising.com/new-80-20-rule-fundraising/

[11] "in 2017, when only 2,902 estates with charitable transfers filed estate tax returns, these estates still produced the majority (59%) of all bequest dollars transferred to charity in the country." James, R. N., III. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning & Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285. p. 250. *Also see,* a total of 2,813,503 decedents in 2017 at https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db328-h.pdf

large-gift fundraising. I'm not trying to start a fight. I'm just trying answer a different question.

So, what's the answer? To get there, it's important to start with two facts:

1. Metrics can hurt.
2. Metrics can help, but only a little.

Metrics can hurt fundraising

I'm a data guy. I love numbers. In analysis, more data is better. But in managing people, the opposite can be true. So, the first goal of fundraising metrics isn't,

> "Measure everything!"

It's not even,

> "Measure all the important things!"

Instead, it's,

> "First, do no harm."

Analytic types – like me – can sometimes miss this danger. How serious is it? Consider this. One study found,

> "over 42% of fundraisers view their metrics as detrimental at worst or ineffective at best in reflecting important behaviors."[12]

[12] Megli, C. D., Barber, A. P. & Hunte, J. L. (2014, December). *Optimizing fundraiser performance.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. http://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/December2014.pdf

Retaining good fundraisers is a challenge. Bad metrics can make it harder. Fundraisers dissatisfied with their jobs often cite unrealistic expectations.[13] This is a problem for the bottom line. Fundraisers are expensive to replace. And they usually don't become highly productive until about their fourth year at a charity.[14]

Using lots of metrics isn't leadership. It isn't management. And it can be harmful. One study looked at 24 fundraising/marketing metrics at 210 large charities.[15] Which charities used the most metrics? Those with the greatest "top management demands for accountability" of fundraising. They were also the *poorest* financial performers.

When metrics reflect a top-down distrust of fundraisers, they don't help.[16] Even in good organizations, less can be more. One study found,

> "gift officers that were more focused on fewer metrics … outperformed those professionals with equally weighted or mixed measurement models. In short, focusing on fewer but

[13] *Id.*

[14] "Fundraisers who jump around hurt their careers and limit their potential to raise money (production jumps at 3.4 to 4 years of tenure, according to BWF data)." Megli, C. D. (2016, January 1). *Outlook: Producing high performers.* CASE. https://www.case.org/resources/outlook-producing-high-performers

[15] Bennett, R. (2007). The use of marketing metrics by British fundraising charities: A survey of current practice. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(9-10), 959-989.

[16] Which charities in the study were most likely to have sound financial performance? Those that had actually invested the most in fundraising/marketing. *See, Id.*

> essential metrics results in increased productivity across a wide range of activities."[17]

Short-term metrics can hurt in business

Large sales result from long-term processes. Short-term financial metrics can undercut these. One study examined failed key account management programs. Reasons for failure included the following:

- "If the end of quarter results are the main objective, Key Account Management never works
- Focus on numbers rather than customer need
- Short-termism: 'Reconciling 36-month Key Account Management objectives with 12-month compensation plans usually frustrates most organizations'
- Focus on [immediate] sales and revenue makes the program focus short-term and leads to failure"[18]

Another study explained simply, "because of the relational nature of their jobs, Strategic Account Managers are not measured using short-term indicators."[19]

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[17] Grabau, T. W. (2010, July). *Major gift metrics that matter.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. https://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/00090978.pdf
[18] Wilson, K., & Woodburn, D. (2014). The impact of organisational context on the failure of key and strategic account management programmes. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 29*(5), 353-363.

[19] Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers – a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 38*(1), 92-122.

The relationships are not about short-term transactions. They're about creating long-term value. Other business researchers explain,

> "This investment in relationships with the company's most strategic customers will only pay off if … the Key Account manager works with a mindset that allows value creation for both his own employer and the Key Account."[20]

Short-term metrics can hurt in fundraising

What about fundraising? One study examined the practices of the highest-growth fundraising organizations. The findings were like those from key account management research in business. These high-growth metrics focused on the long term. They encouraged *behaviors* that created long-term *value* for the donor. The researchers explained,

> "our outstanding leaders aligned their organizational metrics with the longer-term drivers of donor value. There was less concern with metrics such as response rates and immediate return on investment. They focused instead on the standards and behaviors they knew would add value for supporters and thus build donor lifetime value. Their appraisal and reward systems were similarly aligned, to focus

[20] Peters, L., Ivens, B. S., & Pardo, C. (2020). Identification as a challenge in key account management: Conceptual foundations and a qualitative study. *Industrial Marketing Management, 90*, 300-313.

> team member ambitions on the things that mattered most to longer-term growth."[21]

A short-term, transactional focus hurts large-ticket sales in business. But it may be even more harmful in fundraising. In anthropology, giving is not based upon the transactional "exchange" economy. Instead, it originates from the relationship-based "gift" economy.[22]

This social/sharing world has different rules. Focusing on short-term or immediate payback violates those rules. Whenever a relationship becomes "strictly contingent" or transactional, giving stops. This is true across human cultures. One anthropologist writes,

> "Ethnographers studying people as diverse as foragers (Mauss, [1923]) and Irish smallholders (Arensberg, 1959) have long noted that attempts to [strictly] balance exchanges are tantamount to ending … relationships."[23]

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[21] Sargeant, A., & Shang, J. (2016). Outstanding fundraising practice: How do nonprofits substantively increase their income? *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(1), 43-56, 49.

[22] For the original formulation of this idea, *see* Mauss, M. (1923). Essai sur le don forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. *L'Année Sociologique*, 30-186. (A recent English translation is Mauss, M. (2002). *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies.* Routledge.)

[23] Hames, R. (2017). Reciprocal altruism in Yanomamö food exchange. In L. Cronk, N. Chagnon, & W. Irons (Eds.), *Adaptation and human behavior: An anthropological perspective* (pp. 397-416). Routledge. p. 411.
Citing to Arensberg, C. M. (1959). *The Irish countryman: An anthropological study*. P. Smith; Mauss, M. (1967). Essai sure le don. *The gift: Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*. Norton. (A translation of the 1923 essay).

Short-term, transactional behavior signals the absence of a mutual sharing or helping relationship. This kills generosity. Sadly, in many charities this "signal" is accurate. One study examined charity leadership views of seven fundraising metrics.[24] The *least* useful for justifying a budget increase from leadership was this:

> "Predicted improvements in donors' feelings of satisfaction with or commitment to the organization."

Most fundraising managers felt this wasn't even "slightly important" to leadership. The problem wasn't just *failing* to add value for donors. The problem was not even *trying* to do so. This goal wasn't even there to start with. The charities' leadership simply didn't care.[25]

Good metrics start with good story

Not caring about the donor's experience isn't a numbers problem. It's not a problem of what we're measuring. It's a problem of who we're being. It's a story-character problem.

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[24] Bennett, R. (2007). The use of marketing metrics by British fundraising charities: a survey of current practice. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(9-10), 959-989.

[25] It appears that charities care less about donors than businesses care about customers. This study noted, "A conspicuous difference between the findings of the present study and those of at least one investigation completed in the business sector … is that metrics concerning market share and (donor) loyalty, retention and satisfaction were rarely presented to top management [at charities]." Bennett, R. (2007). The use of marketing metrics by British fundraising charities: a survey of current practice. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(9-10), 959-989. p. 980.

The effective fundraiser delivers real value to donors. She advances the donor's hero story as the donor's "guiding-sage." The universal hero story (monomyth) is an identity-enhancement journey. [26] In fundraising, this enhanced identity can be private meaning, public reputation, or both. Advancing the donor's hero story can deliver big value.

Good metrics start with good goals

If you don't buy all that story mumbo-jumbo, let me translate. Metrics that lead in the wrong direction don't help. What's the right direction? In business, it's about creating value for the high-capacity customer. In fundraising, it's about creating value for the high-capacity donor.

[26] This universal story, called the monomyth, includes specific steps. At the end, the main character returns as an honored and victorious hero bringing a boon to the original world. In the story, the hero,

1. Begins in the ordinary world
2. Is faced with a challenge (the call to adventure)
3. Rejects then accepts the call and enters the new world
4. Undergoes ordeals and overcomes an enemy
5. Gains a reward or transformation
6. Returns to the place of beginning with a gift to improve that world

This hero story progresses through
Original Identity [1] → Challenge [2, 3, 4] → Victory [4, 5] → Enhanced Identity [5, 6]

In "business" words, the goal is this:

1. Create and promote personally meaningful philanthropic investments *(i.e., advance the donor's hero story)*
2. by building consultative relationships with donors of capacity *(i.e., by being the donor hero's guiding sage).*

If we've got the wrong goal, metrics won't help. They'll just get us to the wrong place even faster. But with the right goal, metrics can sometimes help.

Good metrics gone bad: Money raised

There are all types of fundraising metrics. But every charity uses this one: Money raised. It's an important metric. It can be helpful. But it's often used wrong. And then, it becomes destructive. This good metric can go bad.

In driving a car, fuel efficiency (miles per gallon [MPG]) is a good metric. If it drops unexpectedly, something is wrong. It might be your spark plugs, motor oil, fuel, fuel injector, air filter, or tire pressure. It might be the way you're driving.

Suppose your job is driving a car. In the back seat is your manager. The car displays instantaneous MPG. You go up a hill. MPG drops. The manager complains. You go down a hill. The manager is elated. You accelerate for an on ramp. The manager screams, "Look at these numbers! This is awful!" You

hit snow or rugged terrain. The manager threatens your job.

How soon would this get frustrating? Yes, a driver can influence this metric, but only a little. Mostly it's controlled by the environment. Managing people based on metrics they can't control is a recipe for frustration.

The problem isn't the metric. The problem is the way it's being used. Tracking money raised is similar. It's good as a long-term diagnostic. It can act as a "warning" light. But it's bad as a short-term "dashboard" metric to drive with.

Any new driver can show good short-term results in MPG. Just coast. Until the car stops, MPG will be great! But that's not good – or sustainable – driving behavior.

Any new fundraiser can show good short-term results in money raised. Ask early! Ask often! Don't ask too big! Just get to the "Yes," right now! This quarter will look good. But this "coasts" on previous relationship building. It's not good – or sustainable – fundraising behavior.

Fixing bad money metrics: Focus on long-term value

So, what are the alternatives? First, focus on the long term. If you want to focus on money, fine.

But focus on *lifetime* donor value, not just next quarter.

I once received a call from a newly hired legacy giving manager at a major health-related charity. He was trying to figure out why their estate gift income had been dropping for nearly a decade. It had fallen consistently, losing tens of millions of dollars year-over-year.

He thought maybe it was demographics. No, I assured him, that wasn't the problem. Then he thought perhaps it was competition. No, I argued, most people have never heard of your competition.

Finally, he recalled another change. About eight years before, a new development director had arrived. The immediate return-on-investment (ROI) analytics showed mailing to older donors wasn't paying off. So, they quit mailing. The next quarter probably looked good. But the short-term metrics crushed their long-term results. Using *lifetime* donor value could have prevented this disaster.

Fixing bad money metrics: Focus on fundraiser actions

Second, consider an alternate approach. Focus on fundraiser *actions*. The fundraiser can better control these. One study examined 270 university fundraisers. It found that,

> "Major Gift Officers with solicitation goals, rather than dollar goals, have better activity with prospects and hit dollar goals anyway."[27]

Metrics can help. They can encourage doing the *hard* stuff. In any job, some tasks are easy or urgent, but not that important. Others are important, but they're hard and not urgent. Metrics, when focused on the hard stuff, can help. They can nudge behavior in the right direction.

Using metrics in the right way: A tool for coaching

What works in managing business sales? One study took an in-depth look. The answer with this:

> "When asked to describe specific sales leader behaviors that best enable salesperson performance, sales professionals – both sales leaders and salespeople – overwhelmingly referenced coaching …"[28]

My daughters ran cross-country in high school. Once, the coach brought his four-year old son to practice. Wanting to help, the boy yelled, "Run faster!" It was cute. But it wasn't coaching. Yelling,

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[27] Birkholz, J. & Hunte, J. (2014, October 30). *The secrets of high-performing, long-tenured gift officers.* [PowerPoint slides]. Bentz Whaley Flessner https://store.case.org/PersonifyEbusiness/Store/Product-Details/productId/165848717

[28] Peesker, K. M., Ryals, L. J., Rich, G. A., & Boehnke, S. E. (2019). A qualitative study of leader behaviors perceived to enable salesperson performance. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 39*(4), 319-333.

"Sell more!" or "Raise more money!" is just as unhelpful.

In coaching, metrics can be a useful tool. They can help the coach diagnose areas for investigation. This can lead to improvements. These come from training, shadowing, guiding, and practice.

The highest growth fundraising charities did use metrics. They measured outcomes. But they used these metrics in a special way. A bad number wasn't a tragedy. It was an opportunity for *learning*. The researchers found,

> "Failure was redefined as the failure to learn from experience if something did not work out as anticipated, rather than the failure of a particular strategy or individual per se … The achievement of this organizational learning culture seemed to us to be absolutely critical in delivering outstanding fundraising."[29]

Metrics don't have to be a top-down tool for punishment. They can even be a bottom-up tool for learning. The most powerful metrics can be those the fundraisers themselves choose, revise, and recommend to leadership.[30] Metrics can be part of an empowered, participatory, learning culture.

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[29] Sargeant, A., & Shang, J. (2016). Outstanding fundraising practice: How do nonprofits substantively increase their income? *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(1), 43-56, 51.

[30] EAB. (n.d.). *What are the right metrics to measure major gift officer performance?* [Website]. https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/advancement/what-are-the-right-metrics-to-measure-mgo-performance/

Metrics aren't perfect

Can metrics help? Yes. A little. Metrics can encourage the right behavior. They can serve as a "check-engine" light. But every metric can be gamed. Every one. Pick your favorite.

Do you like "money raised?" Gifts are lumpy. Getting a big one means you should stop asking until the next reporting period. A great year means you should change jobs. Who wants to compete against that baseline? The real secret to success? It's "owning" the right donors. Get assigned to the right list and get territorial! Hard selling donors is bad long-term. But it sure makes the numbers look good right now!

Maybe you prefer "number of asks?" Just asking a lot is quick. Doing it well requires a longer process.

What about "number (or share) of gifts closed?" Make sure to ask small! Easy asks hit those numbers best.

What about "number of donor visits?" Just go see the old favorites every month. And make it short! Five minutes or a full afternoon counts the same.

What about "significant contacts?" Just focus on whatever is quickest. A letter? E-mail? Phone

call? Just do lots of the easiest thing. Skip the hard parts.

Metrics aren't people

The point of all this isn't that metrics are bad. They can help. We'll look at some great ones next. But metrics help only a little.

If we've got the wrong people, metrics won't fix it. One study of salespeople found this:

> "only 6% of salespeople without the personality traits fitting that trade will perform above average by working hard to compensate for their lack of personality "fit." Emotional intelligence and interrelated features (e.g., competitive intelligence and empathic listening) represent the first pillar of those natural abilities, and the higher the level of emotional intelligence (EI), the better the salesperson will perform … salespeople who do not score highly on EI have little chance of becoming successful Strategic Account Managers."[31]

The same is true in fundraising. Dr. Beth Breeze studied key personal skills in fundraising.[32] The most important included the following:

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[31] Lacoste, S. (2018). From selling to managing strategic customers-a competency analysis. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management, 38*(1), 92-122, p. 110.

[32] Pudelek, J. (2014, July 10). *Eleven characteristics of successful fundraisers revealed at IoF National Convention*. Civil Society.

- High emotional intelligence
- An ability to read people, and
- A great memory for faces, names, and personal details.

Getting the right people "on the bus" matters. The highest-growth fundraising charities showed a common pattern: High fundraiser turnover at the beginning. Low fundraiser turnover later. The researchers described high initial turnover. They explained,

> "In most of our cases, the teams were substantively overhauled. Our interviewees reflected that the people who left or were asked to leave were usually either not up to the task or, critically, did not demonstrate the level of passion and commitment necessary for the new fundraising approach."[33]

But keeping the right people was just as important. They explained,

> "None of the organizations we interviewed, after the right team had been built, suffered from the high turnover rates that otherwise pervade the fundraising sector."[34]

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https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/eleven-characteristics-of-successful-fundraisers-revealed-at-iof-national-convention.html

[33] Sargeant, A., & Shang, J. (2016). Outstanding fundraising practice: How do nonprofits substantively increase their income? *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(1), 43-56.

[34] *Id.*

Conclusion

The secret to success isn't just about metrics. Metrics might get a fundraiser her next job. But they won't keep her in this one. Metrics aren't purpose, cause, or inspiration. They're not coaching, identity, autonomy, or personal growth. Metrics can help. But only a little.

18

STORY SOLUTIONS WITH FUNDRAISING METRICS: ADVANCING THE RIGHT STORY FOR THE RIGHT DONORS

The right metrics

Fundraising metrics can't do everything. But they can answer four key questions:[1]

1. Are we focused on the right donors?
2. Do we have individual plans for them?
3. Are we seeing them?
4. Are we asking them?

These are important questions. Answering "yes" doesn't guarantee success. But, answering "no"

[1] See examples of similar ideas in Wilson, K. L. (2015). *Determining the critical elements of evaluation for university advancement staff: Quantifiable and nonquantifiable variables associated with fundraising success*. [Dissertation]. East Tennessee State University. ("a) do you have enough prospects, b) are you seeing them, c) are you asking them." p. 57; "number of personal visits made with rated, assigned prospects as reported in contact reports, and the number of proposals submitted with proposal date, content and asks amount." p. 58).

usually guarantees failure. This is also a common feature of metrics in storytelling.

Suppose we were managing novel writers. One metric might be hours per day spent writing. Another might be words per day. Hitting these metrics won't guarantee a successful novel. But their absence does guarantee failure.

I don't manage novelists, but I do manage Ph.D. students as their dissertation advisor. Completing a dissertation requires many things. Students will read research. They'll run experiments. They'll analyze data. They'll fill out paperwork. They'll think, talk, and write. I've had many succeed and others fail. Over the years, I've learned to predict this outcome with just one number. That number is hours per day spent writing.

Students who write consistently will finish.[2] Otherwise, they often won't. Here's why. Students fail, but not because they don't do the fun parts. They fail because they don't do the hard parts. Writing is the hard part. All of the parts are necessary. But the only metric that matters is the *hard* part.[3] The best metrics encourage doing the hard stuff. This applies

[2] Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis.* Holt Paperbacks.

[3] The same phenomenon can be seen in sports. One study looked at which activities separated local-level and national-level under-18 soccer players. The national-level players had accumulated more hours in focused practice. They actually accumulated fewer hours in "playful activities" in soccer. It wasn't just about putting in the hours. It was about putting in the hours doing the hard stuff. Ward, P., Hodges, N. J., Starkes, J. L., & Williams, M. A. (2007). The road to excellence: Deliberate practice and the development of expertise. *High Ability Studies, 18*(2), 119-153.

in managing dissertations. And it applies in managing fundraising.

1. Are we focused on the right donors?

Fundraising math v. fundraising emotion

So, let's start with the hard stuff. There's a difference between what's fun and what's important. Consider some simple math.

> Scenario 1. You spend the next two years working with 100 donors. Each has capacity to make a $10,000 gift. Interest in giving is high. Each has a 75% chance of making that gift.
>
> Scenario 2. You spend the next two years working with 100 donors. Each has capacity to make a $1 million gift. Interest in giving is low. Each has a 3% chance of making that gift.

Mathematically, the answer is easy. Scenario 2 raises four times as much money. The charity receives $3,000,000 instead of $750,000.

Emotionally, the answer is hard. Suppose you make one gift proposal per week. That's 100 over the course of two years. In Scenario 1 you constantly win. Three out of four weeks, you bring back a big gift.

In Scenario 2, you constantly lose. On average you'll lose *33 times* for every victory. You'll have all of your proposals rejected for over 8 months. And you'll

raise four times as much money.[4] What *feels like* losing actually wins. Emotionally, a series of small wins feels more attractive. But that's not how the numbers work.

Sports math v. sports emotion

The same result happens in modern sports. Before analytics, coaches and players did what "felt" good. They avoided the negative emotions of any negative outcome. After analytics, games changed. Higher risk, higher reward tactics grew. In basketball, the three-point shot took over. This shot also has the greatest chance of missing. Baseball moved to home runs or bust. This also increases strike outs. In football, throwing increased over running. This also has a higher risk of a turnover or no gain.[5]

In each case, analytics corrects the emotions of "loss aversion." It moves towards higher risk, higher reward tactics. In both sports and fundraising, the emotions don't match the math. Focusing on winning a larger *share* of plays (or asks) feels better. Focusing

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[4] In reality, this difference becomes even larger. In the following year, you would have only 3 long-term relationships to manage instead of 75. And the high-capacity donor is more likely to refer to other high-capacity donors, leading to even greater growth differences.

[5] Part of this change can also be attributed to other rule changes favoring the forward pass. Thus, a cleaner comparison would be the increasing propensity to avoid punting on 4th down. Again, analytics more often points to taking the high risk, high reward approach: Go for it on 4th down. Emotions and loss aversion favor the low risk, low reward decision: Punt on 4th down. *See* Dalen, P. (2013, November 15). Conventional wisdom be damned: The math behind Pulaski Academy's offense. https://www.footballstudyhall.com/2013/11/15/5105958/fourth-down-pulaski-academy-kevin-kelley

on winning the *biggest* plays (or asks) actually works better.

Major donor math

Ideally, we want donors with high interest and high capacity. But capacity and interest are *not* equally important. That's not how the math works. That's also not how people work.

We can influence a donor's interest. Creating donor experiences helps. Building relationships with the charity employees, beneficiaries, or other donors helps. Making connections with the donor's values, people, and life story helps. Any of these can change interest. And what can we do to change a donor's capacity? Nothing.

The right behavior requires spending time with high-capacity prospects. But the *right* behavior isn't the *easy* behavior. As James Daniel writes,

> "Many would gladly trade cold million-dollar prospects for warm ten-thousand-dollar prospects. Unfortunately, many do make this swap – a recipe for failure."[6]

The prospect prescription

The right metrics should nudge the right behavior. The right behavior requires spending time with high-capacity donors. There are, of course, many

[6] Daniel, J. P. (2009, January 26). *Cold calls, the first hurdle.* [Website]. BWF. https://www.bwf.com/cold-calls-first-hurdle/

ways to measure this. We might have capacity minimums for major gift officer portfolios. We might multiply activity metrics by capacity rating. (Getting a visit with a high-capacity prospect is a bigger deal.) We can be more flexible with high-capacity success rates and timetables.

But what if we don't have enough high-capacity donors? What if we don't have any? Systematic, planned efforts to contact new prospects can help.[7] John Greenhoe relates,

> "the most successful development officers I have worked with developed a regimented procedure for connecting with new prospects."

Referrals can work, too. We can always ask,

> "Who do you know that may be interested in our work?" [8]

But what works better is to start with what we can give, not what we want to get. This starts with a simple question:

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[7] "Fundraisers who are disciplined about calling new prospective donors typically fare well. Those who aren't usually don't last long in this field." Greenhoe, John. (2013). *Opening the door to major gifts: Mastering the discovery call.* CharityChannel Press. p. 27.

[8] Pittman-Schulz, K. (2012, October). *In the door and then what?* [Paper presentation]. National Conference on Philanthropic Planning, New Orleans, LA. p. 14. ("Who do you know that may be interested in our work? Would you send a note to introduce me, or arrange for us to do lunch? You like to entertain—how about a dinner party or reception?"); *See also* Baker, B., Bullock, K., Gifford, G. L., Grow, P., Jacobwith, L. L., Pitman, M. A., Truhlar, S., & Rees, S. (2013). *The essential fundraising handbook for small nonprofits.* The Nonprofit Academy. p. 154. ("Do you know other people that may be interested in learning about what we're doing?").

> "How can we *provide value* to high-capacity prospects?"

Maybe we're offering attractive experiences. Maybe we're giving recognition or prestige. Maybe we're sharing gift planning expertise. Maybe it's access to a valuable social network. Our efforts are more likely to pay off when we lead with value.

Internal support: The advocacy story

High-capacity outreach works. Leading with value works. But these take time. Sustaining internal support can be challenging.

It may help to reframe the internal story about prospect outreach. For example, many charities focus on advocacy. But what is advocacy? It's promoting the cause to those with the power to make a difference.

Getting a 30-minute meeting with a senator is reason for celebration. Why? Because that person has capacity to make an impact for the cause. What about getting a meeting with a high-capacity prospect? This should also be a cause for celebration. Why? Same reason.

Advocacy is celebrated. It's part of the core mission. Expanding the advocacy story to include major donor discovery can change perspectives. It can increase internal support for these long-term processes.

Do we have the right legacy prospects?

With legacy giving, the hard stuff gets even harder. Wealth is important in giving. It's even more important in legacy giving. In annual giving, a low-wealth donor can make substantial contributions. In legacy giving, he can't. In annual giving, the value of small gifts can accumulate over many years. In legacy giving, there's only one gift. The wealthiest 0.1% of decedents donate 59% of all charitable estate dollars.[9] Also, wealthy people give a larger *share* of their overall donations as legacy gifts.[10]

And it gets harder. Old-age and end-of-life decisions dominate. Nearly 80% of charitable estate dollars are transferred by documents signed by donors in their 80s, 90s, or older.[11] Most charitable decedents switched from non-charitable estate plans in the final 5 years of life.[12]

Charities also get dropped from plans. Among older adults, the ten-year retention rate for a

[9] "in 2017, when only 2,902 estates with charitable transfers filed estate tax returns, these estates still produced the majority (59%) of all bequest dollars transferred to charity in the country." James, R. N., III. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning & Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285. p. 250. *Also see* a total of 2,813,503 decedents in 2017 at https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db328-h.pdf

[10] Steuerle, C. E., Bourne, J., Ovalle, J., Raub, B., Newcomb, J., & Steele, E. (2018). *Patterns of giving by the wealthy.* Urban Institute. Table 4. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99018/patterns_of_giving_by_the_wealthy_2.pdf

[11] James, R. N., III., & Baker, C. (2015). The timing of final charitable bequest decisions. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 20*(3), 277-283.

[12] *Id.*

charitable estate component is only 55%.[13] Only 65% of legacy society members actually generate estate gifts.[14] Part of the reason is this: About 1 in 4 legacy society members received no communications from the charity in their last two years of life.[15] Why? Often, it's because charities communicate based only on recency of donations. Charitable decedents normally stop donating during the last few years of life.[16]

Who are the right legacy prospects? The oldest, wealthiest, childless friends of the charity.[17] The money will come from just a few, extreme donors. In financial terms, typical donors don't matter. For example, most estate donors leave less than 10% of their estate to charity. Taken together, these typical donors transfer only 3.8% of total charitable bequest dollars.[18] Most money comes from the tiny fraction of donors that give 90% or more of their estate to charity.[19]

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[13] *Id.*
[14] Wishart, R., & James, R. N., III. (2021). The final outcome of charitable bequest gift intentions: Findings and implications for legacy fundraising. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, e1703.
[15] Wishart, R., & James, R. N., III. (2021). The final outcome of charitable bequest gift intentions: Findings and implications for legacy fundraising. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, e1703.
[16] James, R. N., III. (2020). The emerging potential of longitudinal empirical research in estate planning: Examples from charitable bequests. *UC Davis Law Review, 53*, 2397-2431
[17] James, R. N., III. (2009). Health, wealth, and charitable estate planning: A longitudinal examination of testamentary charitable giving plans. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 38*(6), 1026-1043.
[18] James, R. N., III. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning & Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285.
[19] *Id.*

Given all this, common legacy metrics are simply wrong. This is a world dominated by statistical extremes. Only the outliers matter. Yet, charities typically count every donor as "one." A ten-million-dollar planned estate gift from a childless, 95-year-old? That's one. That's one legacy society member. A 25-year-old adding the charity as a death beneficiary on a new bank account? That's also one. One legacy society member.

And it gets worse. Getting a new legacy society member only *starts* a process that might eventually lead to money. These are, after all, highly fluid decisions, especially near the end of life.[20] But fundraisers are rewarded only for *starting* this process. They get no reward for *continuing* it.

And it gets even worse. Generating a new legacy plan counts as one. This may require months of working with a donor. Discovering a pre-existing plan counts the same. This requires a postage stamp on a mass survey.

The legacy prospect prescription

Legacy metrics could be different. They could separate plan discovery from plan creation. They could also value gifts differently.

[20] James, R. N., III. (2020). The emerging potential of longitudinal empirical research in estate planning: Examples from charitable bequests. *UC Davis Law Review, 53*, 2397-2431

Valuing an *irrevocable* estate gift is simple.[21] One from a 55-year-old donor counts at 33% of face value (using a 5% interest rate).[22] Multiplying again accounts for the risk of revocation: 33% of 33% is 11%. This revocable gift counts at 11% of face value.

This approach can also reward maintaining relationships. Reconfirming the gift at 65 adds another 10% of face value. (At this age, 46% of 46% is 21%.) Reconfirming again at 72, 77, 82, 87, and 92 adds 10% of face value each time.[23] This creates ongoing goals. It avoids a “count it and forget it” approach.

Of course, counting new plans as “one and done” is easier. It makes life more fun. Fundraisers can just spend time with donors their own age. They don’t have to worry about maintaining relationships until the end of life. They don’t have to deal with “old people” attitudes, frailties, and family. They also don’t need to worry about wealth or complex plans. A token gift counts the same as a massive one.

Are the right metrics the answer in legacy giving? They can help, but other factors also matter. A charity’s cause or culture matters. Some causes win

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[21] Valuation Table S for single life and R for joint lives are at https://www.irs.gov/retirement-plans/actuarial-tables
Simply scroll down to your preferred interest rate and use the “Remainder” percentage next to the age of the donor(s).

[22] Using a 5% interest rate, Table S reports a Remainder value of 0.33032 at https://www.irs.gov/retirement-plans/actuarial-tables

[23] Of course, this counting is only for internal administrative purposes. It should never be shared with donors. Instead, donors should always receive recognition for 100% of the face amount of any planned gifts.

because they're naturally in front of people in their 80s and 90s. Pets, cancer, healthcare, and hospice are normally winners.[24]

Others succeed with a culture that values visiting their oldest friends. (They may be especially concerned for those who have no children visiting them.) This works for legacy fundraising.[25] Many universities never lose contact with their alumni – regardless of their current donations.[26] This also works for legacy fundraising. Others include legacy giving as part of their regular messaging. Again, this works for legacy fundraising.

These charities may not "measure" any better. They may not measure at all. But doing the right things still works, even without the metrics. Metrics can help. But the charity's cause and culture matter more.

2. Do we have individual plans for them?

Individual plans: Research findings

The business world doesn't have "major donors." It doesn't have "principal gifts." Instead, it has "key accounts." What works in the world of key account management? One study looked at 20

[24] These causes are typical for charities receiving the largest share of their fundraising income from legacy gifts. *See*, Pharoah, C. (2010). *Charity market monitor 2010*. CaritasData.

[25] James, R. N., III. (2020). American charitable bequest transfers across the centuries: Empirical findings and implications for policy and practice. *Estate Planning and Community Property Law Journal, 12*, 235-285

[26] James, R. N., III. (2020). The emerging potential of longitudinal empirical research in estate planning: Examples from charitable bequests. *UC Davis Law Review, 53*, 2397-2431.

practices across 209 businesses. It then statistically tested to see which predicted success. The answer? Only one practice simultaneously predicted

- Increased share of customer spend
- Revenues
- Customer satisfaction
- Relationship improvement, and
- Improved retention.[27]

What was it? Having individual plans for each key account. The winners planned each account separately to ensure the best service. This finding is powerful, but it's not new. Many studies have found similar results.[28] Individual plans are key for key account management.

This also works in fundraising. A nationwide study of the most effective major gifts fundraising metrics found this:

> "Written strategies for each gift officer's top 25 to 50 prospects with specific initiatives, specific

[27] Davies, I. A., & Ryals, L. J. (2014). The effectiveness of key account management practices. *Industrial Marketing Management, 43*(7), 1182-1194. Table 8A and 8B. (This was the only factor significantly and positively related to every one of these outcomes.)

[28] McDonald, M., Rogers, B., & Woodburn, D. (2000). *Key customers: How to manage them profitably.* Butterworth-Heinemann; Ojasalo, J. (2002). Key account management in information-intensive services. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 9*(5), 269-276; Ryals, L. J., & Rogers, B. (2007). Key account planning: Benefits, barriers and best practice. *Journal of Strategic Marketing, 15*(2&3), 209-222; Storbacka, K. (2012). Strategic account management programs: Alignment of design elements and management practices. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 27*(4), 259-274.

persons to be involved in each task including internal partners and external volunteers, and specific target dates for each purposeful action should be required and documented …"[29]

Individual plans: Why do they work?

Why are individual plans so powerful? First, consider the business answer. The successful business is a valued advisor for its key customers. This consultative relationship requires individual plans.

This is different than just selling. Selling doesn't need individual plans. Selling just pushes the product. The customer's path is always the same: buy! Then buy some more! In key account management, individual plans are essential. In traditional sales, they don't matter. Thus, this one factor divides the two approaches.

Next, consider the fundraising answer. The "one big thing" in fundraising is always the same: Advance the donor's hero story. Will that story be the same for every donor? Of course not. If it is, then it's not the donor's story. An individual story requires an individual plan.

An individual plan can help to advance the donor's story. It can map out a journey with specific steps. A step might link to the donor's identity: his

[29] Grabau, T. W. (2010, July). *Major gift metrics that matter.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. https://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/00090978.pdf

people, values, or life story. It might connect these to the charity, the cause, or a specific challenge. It might show how a gift has led to a victory. It might confirm the personal meaningfulness of that victory.

Not every meeting will include an ask for a gift. But every meeting should include an ask. The ask is for the next step in the donor's plan. This might be to take a tour. It might be to attend a meeting. It might be to listen to a proposal. The donor's individual plan guides the process. This plan can change just "seeing them" into advancing the donor's journey.

Of course, having individual plans won't guarantee success. But not having them probably shows that something is missing. If individual plans feel unnecessary, watch out!

- You might just be "pushing product." This is different than being the donor-hero's "guiding sage."
- You might not have the right donors. Only high-capacity donors warrant individual plans.
- You might just be acting friendly instead of fundraising. Just talking doesn't progress towards a meaningful ask.

3. Are we seeing them?

An important start

It's hard to raise major gifts sitting in the office. "Go see people," helps. Seeing the right people helps

more. Seeing the right people as part of a personal customized plan helps even more. These don't guarantee success, but not doing them probably does guarantee failure. It's like writing a novel. Hitting 2,000 words per day doesn't guarantee success. But hitting 0 does guarantee failure.

How do we answer, "Are we seeing them?" First, "them" means the high-capacity donors from step 1. Second, "seeing them" is not just about number of visits. It's also about the share of the portfolio visited.[30] You might have 1,000 personal visits. But for a donor you didn't visit, the answer to this question is still, "No"?

This highlights another problem. Why do we have so many people in the portfolio? The answer is often bad metrics. As one author explains,

> "If the primary goal is total funds raised … it is in an officer's best interest to have a very large portfolio of already proven donors."[31]

As a result,

> "Portfolios tend to grow into unwieldy hordes of neglected names or become stagnant like ponds disconnected from moving water."[32]

[30] Megli, C. D., Barber, A. P. & Hunte, J. L. (2014, December). *Optimizing fundraiser performance.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. http://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/December2014.pdf

[31] BWF Research. (2016, June 23). *How to survive drowning in an unwieldy portfolio hoard.* [Website]. BWF. https://www.bwf.com/data-science/survive-drowning-unwieldy-portfolio-hoard/

[32] *Id.*

Having too many people in the portfolio can be a problem. It's a problem when it changes the answer to the question, "Are we seeing them?"

What do we do when the answer to this question is, "No."? How can we fix it? There are two answers:

1. Reduce (or divide) the portfolio.
2. See more people.

Let's look at each option.

"Seeing them" solutions: Reduce the portfolio

Major gift officers often have 125-150 donors in their portfolio. This is at or beyond the extreme maximum for maintaining human relations.[33] Managing that many relationships can lead to minimal contacts with each person.

Often, focusing more time on the best prospects works better. One way to do this is to make the portfolio smaller. Don't be afraid. This isn't the end of the world! One report finds,

> "Institutions that have reduced Major Gift Officer portfolio size have actually seen

[33] See an evolutionary argument for a maximum of 150 people in Dunbar, R. I. (2018). The anatomy of friendship. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 22*(1), 32-51. Note that this maximum would NOT suggest a portfolio of this size unless the fundraiser had no other social connections in her life. Another view holds that the number may be about double this for online relationships. *See* Zhao, J., Wu, J., Liu, G., Tao, D., Xu, K., & Liu, C. (2014). Being rational or aggressive? A revisit to Dunbar's number in online social networks. *Neurocomputing, 142*, 343-353.

> increases in the number of asks, number of gifts, and overall dollars raised."[34]

An analysis of hundreds of campaigns found,

> "In the vast majority of cases, portfolio optimization provides the biggest delta in rapid production increases … It is a simple question of, "Are we seeing the best prospects?" So much energy goes into the "seeing," but the "best prospects" portion of the question continues to be our main missed opportunity pain point."[35]

"Seeing them" solutions: Divide the portfolio

If a smaller portfolio isn't acceptable, another approach can work. Separate the portfolio into active and passive relationships. In active relationships, the donor is in cultivation for a gift. The individual plan is moving toward a time-targeted ask. The fundraiser must be visiting, or at least regularly seeking visits, with all active group participants.

In contrast, the passive portfolio has fewer – or no – visit expectations. The donor gets special attention only if the donor initiates contact. The fundraiser is still available when needed. Responding

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[34] EAB. (n.d.). *What are the right metrics to measure major gift officer performance?* [Website]. https://eab.com/insights/expert-insight/advancement/what-are-the-right-metrics-to-measure-mgo-performance/

[35] BWF Research. (2016, June 23). *How to survive drowning in an unwieldy portfolio hoard*. [Website]. BWF. https://www.bwf.com/data-science/survive-drowning-unwieldy-portfolio-hoard/

to donor requests is still important. Taking advantage of chance encounters is great. Receiving unexpected gifts is wonderful. But these aren't the same as planned activities. And they shouldn't be counted the same.

Actively dividing a portfolio is different than passively ignoring part of it. Dividing is planned. It's based on interest, capacity, and the individual donor journey. Ignoring is reactive. It encourages the easy meetings, not the important ones.

"Seeing them" solutions: See more people

The question is, "Are we seeing them?" We want to answer, "Yes." One approach is to reduce the number of people who count as "them." The "them" is limited to key high-capacity donors.

Another approach is to see more of these people. How? More effective strategies for setting appointments can help. So can nudging fundraisers to prioritize visits. But usually, it is *the manager's* behavior that drives this number.

What prevents fundraisers from hitting their visit goals? A study of 660 frontline fundraisers found the answer.[36] Managers started with high goals. They wanted fundraisers to spend most of their time on major gifts fundraising. But few met these

[36] Megli, C. D., Barber, A. P. & Hunte, J. L. (2014, December). *Optimizing fundraiser performance.* Bentz, Whaley, Flessner. http://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/December2014.pdf

expectations. Why not? The fundraisers identified the barriers:

- 70% referenced other administrative work.
- 52% referenced team and program management.
- 46% referenced events.
- 43% referenced support to deans/units/programs.

Another study found a similar result. One manager of a high-growth-fundraising charity explained it this way,

> "You would think I maintained tight oversight of my team, but in reality, I spend most of my time managing the organization so that my team can maximize their impact."[37]

With competent and willing fundraisers, the biggest change will come from *the manager's* behavior. The manager's task is to protect the fundraiser from the endless array of low-value, internal, "urgent" tasks.[38] The manager frees the fundraiser to "Go see them."

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[37] Sargeant, A., & Shang, J. (2016). Outstanding fundraising practice: How do nonprofits substantively increase their income? *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing, 21*(1), 43-56.

[38] "What could be easier than focusing on the few who can make major gifts and seeing them? Yet, not seeing donors is the most significant and common barrier to success. What's going on? Most major gift fundraisers have other duties—special events, reports, meetings—that appear more "urgent" than making visits. Visits are urgent only when scheduled; until then, they are movable. Fundraisers fall victim to the tyranny of the urgent and lose focus." Daniel, J. P. (2009, January 26). *Cold calls, the first hurdle.* BWF. https://www.bwf.com/published-by-bwf/cold-calls-the-first-hurdle/

4. Are we asking them?

Making the hero story ask

Asking doesn't guarantee success. But not asking probably does guarantee failure. Asking metrics are important because asking is hard. Metrics help focus actions on the hard parts.

Asking is important. Making the right ask is even more important. The right ask will advance the donor's hero story. Every hero story has a "call to adventure." It is a challenge. It will link,

Original Identity → Challenge → Victory → Enhanced Identity

This rarely happens with a generic, shotgun-style approach to asking. It requires a planned, personal ask.

Advancing a hero story requires a heroic "call to adventure." A small, comfortable ask cannot fill this role. The heroic ask is "big." It can be big relative to past giving. It can be big relative to other capacity measurements.

One study analyzed nearly 1,000 gift officers. The top 20% highest-producing fundraisers raised about 75% of the dollars. What was different about these special fundraisers? Two of the factors related to asking. The study found,

> "The top 20 percent of officers tended to solicit gifts at the research capacity ratings … The

> bottom 80 percent tended to ask for about 40 percent of the capacity ratings …"[39]

There was also another difference. This heroic ask was a planned step in a journey. It was part of a specific, defined process. The study explained,

> "Top performers have a consistent timeframe for managing the cultivation process, and the average was about 11 months. Lower performers either asked too soon for lesser levels, or dragged out the process. It is best to have a consistent action path that leads toward solicitation."[40]

Other research finds,

> "Stronger fundraisers go on more calls, yes, but they also ask earlier and make more ambitious solicitations."[41]

Asking indicators

The right behavior is to make planned, personal, "stretch" asks. Doing this works. But it's also hard. Asking for the small, comfortable gift is easier. Asking blindly without cultivation is also easier. Putting off the ask, or avoiding it altogether, is the easiest.

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[39] Birkholz, J. M. (2018, January). Planned giving fundraiser metrics. *Planned Giving Today,* p. 6-8. p. 7

[40] *Id.*

[41] BWF. (2014, July 25). *Client advisory – 5 tips for effective, meaningful performance reviews.* [Website]. https://www.bwf.com/published-by-bwf/client-advisory-5-tips-for-effective-meaningful-performance-reviews/

Metrics can help. Too much time in cultivation can be a warning light. It can alert that the donor's story isn't advancing.[42] Measuring asks relative to a capacity indicator can help. It can show if the ask is truly a heroic "call to adventure."

Asking for assets is also powerful. It can change a gift's reference point from disposable income to wealth. This makes larger gifts feel more affordable. It also allows for broader conversations. These can cover the donor's wealth and philanthropic goals. It can lead to deeper, consultative relationships. Giving special credit for asset asks can help long-term fundraising growth.[43]

Tracking gifts closed is fine. But beware! Asking to capacity won't have the same close rate as asking small. A heroic "call to adventure" is often met with an initial, "No." But a "no," handled well, can still advance the story. It can show what is, and what isn't, important to the donor. It can lead to the next challenge.

[42] "Most programs have a gift officer who has a portfolio filled with prospects in a state of perpetual cultivation that never get solicited…. The time in cultivation metric would serve as a red flag of inaction and a barometer of the efficiency with which prospects move from discovery through cultivation to the actual solicitation." Grabau, T. W. (2010, July). *Major gift metrics that matter.* https://www.bwf.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/00090978.pdf

[43] See James, R. N., III. (2018). Cash is not king for fund-raising: Gifts of noncash assets predict current and future contributions growth. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 29*(2), 159-179.

Team asking

It's easy to think of fundraising in one-to-one terms. A single fundraiser guides the donor. But it can also be a team effort. Different people can focus on different steps in the story. This can be more effective for several reasons.

Advancing different parts of the donor's story uses different skills. Reporting impact requires different skills than asking. So does delivering publicity or gratitude. So does building identity connections with the charity.

These different skills can be a more natural fit for different people. They also have different wage costs. It's relatively easy to find people to manage donor events. It's much harder to find those who will effectively ask for money. Separating the tasks allows those with high-value skills to spend more time using them.

Also, this division of labor helps people improve. It's hard to get better at a task when we don't do it that often. If asking is a rare experience, improvements may come slowly or not at all.

Separating these tasks also prevents story steps from being forgotten. It's easy to put off making the ask when there are other things to do. It's easy to skip impact reporting, gratitude, or publicity when there are more urgent tasks. But when a task is a person's primary focus, it's unlikely to be forgotten.

Conclusion

So, what's the magical metric system that guarantees success? Sorry. Metrics probably aren't "the" answer. In fact, they're just as likely to be the problem. Metrics aren't people. They aren't leadership, strategy, or skills.

A fundraising problem likely isn't just a metrics problem. Often, it's a story problem.

- Maybe fundraisers are telling the wrong story. (The *administrator*-hero story works only for small gifts. The *donor*-hero story works for large gifts.)
- Maybe fundraisers are being the wrong story character. (The friendly "jester" character may be fun. But advancing the donor's long-term journey requires the wise and persistent "guiding sage.")
- Maybe donors lack the capacity to play the major gift donor-hero role. (The major gift "weapon" may be too heavy for this prospective hero to lift.)

But metrics can still help. They can answer:

1. Are we focused on the right donors?
2. Do we have individual plans for them?
3. Are we seeing them?
4. Are we asking them?

Having these doesn't guarantee success. But not having them probably does guarantee failure.

Metrics aren't magic. They can't tell the story for us. But they can nudge the right storytelling behavior, especially the hard stuff. They can be a diagnostic "check-engine" light when story parts are missing. They can help, a little, with the "one big thing" in fundraising. They can help advance the donor's hero story.

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The Fundraising Myth & Science Series Book III

THE PRIMAL FUNDRAISER:
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Russell James III, J.D., Ph.D., CFP® is a professor at Texas Tech University where he holds the CH Foundation chair in personal financial planning. He directs the on-campus and online graduate program in Charitable Financial Planning (planned giving). He also teaches graduate courses in behavioral finance. He holds a Ph.D. in consumer economics from the University of Missouri, where his dissertation was on charitable giving. He graduated, *cum laude*, from the University of Missouri School of Law. He was a member of the *Missouri Law Review* and received the United Missouri Bank Award for Most Outstanding Work in Gift and Estate Taxation and Planning.

Prior to his career as an academic researcher, Dr. James worked as the Director of Planned Giving for Central Christian College in Moberly, Missouri for 6 years and later served as president of the college for more than 5 years, where he had direct and supervisory responsibility for all fundraising. During his presidency, the college successfully completed two major capital campaigns, built several new debt-free buildings, and more than tripled enrollment.

Dr. James has published research in over 75 peer-reviewed scientific journal and law review articles. He

has been quoted on charitable and financial issues in a variety of news sources including *The Economist, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, MSNBC, CNBC, ABC News, U.S. News & World Report, USA Today, the Associated Press, Bloomberg News,* and the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. His financial neuroimaging research was profiled in *The Wall Street Journal's Smart Money Magazine*.

His other books include

Visual Planned Giving: An Introduction to the Law & Taxation of Charitable Gift Planning

Inside the Mind of the Bequest Donor: A Visual Presentation of the Neuroscience and Psychology of Effective Planned Giving Communication

For links to his videos, slide presentations, and papers, please connect on LinkedIn.