



Building a Grassroots Fundraising Culture: Answering the Tough Questions

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Can our constituency afford to give to us?

- In multiple studies, poor and working class people tend to give a higher percentage of their income than upper middle class or wealthy people. People give when they are asked. (From *Fundraising for Social Change* by Kim Klein, citing statistics from *Giving U.S.A.*)
- Many of our low-income members are asked to give in their religious institutions and they respond with great generosity. They could do the same for us if approached in a sincere way. They sure aren't going to be insulted that we asked them.

Is the money really out there?

- Individuals in the US give away more than \$250 BILLION dollars annually. There is plenty of money to support our work, if we make building an individual donor base a priority.
- Every organization that has a constituency can raise and give money. We have a history of successful work and are engaged in important campaigns now that people will be happy to support. If there is a base of people willing to put their time into our campaigns, there is a base of people who can give money. (Think of an organization someone might find not very exciting and point out how they have a fundraising base – i.e., if the national stamp collectors organization can have 50,000 members based on the passion of their constituency, surely we can make headway in our grassroots fundraising!)

How can I get through my nervousness asking for money?

- That's real. Most people have a hard time asking for money because of the way we were raised to think about money (i.e., something we don't talk about openly or it's a source of pain). No one will be left alone. It is our organization's job to make sure you are trained and supported. And we will celebrate together.

Won't grassroots fundraising add to our already heavy workload?

- Our goal will be to integrate fundraising into our ongoing work as much as possible so that part of it won't add time.
- We will have fundraising specific tasks for everyone but we will look at doing those during dedicated times of the year. We will find times where it makes sense in terms

of the workload and in terms of how to best integrate fundraising with our organizing work.

- Some grassroots fundraising tasks actually don't take that much time. For example, it takes very little time to call five people and ask them for money. It is the fear of asking for money that takes mental time and makes the workload **feel** larger. We're going to address that through training and teaming up.
- Grassroots fundraising furthers our program goals. Developing materials, resources, and messaging for fundraising not only helps bring in donors, but also with identifying people who might take other actions in our movement. Donors are prime people to also sign petitions, go to rallies, and provide other kinds of political support.

This is not how we've done things – I'm just uncomfortable

- We believe in developing grassroots leadership. Leadership development should include understanding our organization's financial needs and participating in insuring that we meet our goals. Financial information and fundraising needs should not be walled off from our members as privileged information. Imagine how invested leaders, board and staff would feel if they themselves played a bigger role in the financial sustenance of our organization.
- Not having conversations about money or lacking information about money is part of what gives people power over our communities (think home mortgages). We have the opportunity to role model in our work forthrightness about money that can trickle into other parts of our leaders' lives and the ways we approach organizing.
- Some of our members and allies have asked how we are supported. They are ready to give and ask. (Give examples of those who have given or asked others without even being asked do so.)
- We may not have asked individuals to give money but we've asked them to do just about everything else! We've seen people stretch, grow and be proud of their own and our achievements. Judging by what other organizations have done, our leaders and staff can surely do this too.

Why can't we just get more foundation money? Beside, does grassroots fundraising work? Isn't it too little money for the effort?

Current Practice: It's true that many organizations have benefitted from foundation dollars and relied upon them, including our own. But there is a growing trend over the past fifteen years or so for non-profits to diversify their income. Now with the drop in foundation dollars, more groups are looking with more urgency at donors. In a sense, this is simply a return to how social change was funded before the era of big foundation dollars (see below)!

Current Examples:

Mujeres Unidas y Activas, a grassroots immigrant Latina organization in San Francisco and Oakland. In five years, they grew their grassroots fundraising program so that 15% of the organization's budget is now coming from individual donors. They went from 300 active donors to 628 donors with member, staff and board involvement in multiple strategies.

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, a grassroots statewide organization. Grew from \$65,000 to \$200,000 in grassroots fundraising in three years through membership dues, direct mail, fundraisers, pledge program, raffles, sales and a few major donors.

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement. Grew to 3,000 members between 1995 to 2007 through strategies that include member asks throughout their organizing as well as fundraising specific asks. By 2008, only half of their approximately one million-dollar budget was from foundations. (See March/April 2010 *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* for this case study). And they are still going strong with their grassroots fundraising program!

Historical Examples: Some of the greatest achievements for justice were completely or almost completely supported by the community. The many local struggles that made up the Southern Civil Rights movement were supported by local, low-income, African-American communities in cities throughout the South and African-Americans through their churches and organizations in the North. In Birmingham, AL, approximately \$312,000 in today's dollars was raised from within the local African-American community over three years. (From *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* by Aldon Morris).

Think of any movement before approximately the 1970's (UFW is another example) and you will find a movement that raised money primarily or entirely from its constituency and allied individual donors.

Doesn't getting a foundation grant of \$10,000 take less time and brings in more money than grassroots fundraising?

- At first, it won't feel as efficient as our foundation fundraising. But we would be **investing** - just as we invest time in developing our leaders - so that we do have a steady income stream.
- The way grassroots fundraising becomes really efficient and gets results is when it is part of everyone's work with the organization, at least some of the time, and when it's embedded in everything we do.
- Maybe some of our foundation fundraising isn't as efficient as we think and/or ties our hands too much. In some cases, we've spent well 40 hours of a person's time cultivating a grant, writing it and reporting on it and contorting our program to boot! If we were to put that kind of time into raising unrestricted money, that could give us more freedom to do what our members and we genuinely want to do.
- Foundation fundraising centralizes the work in one or two staff people's hands, which means that very few people control the funding of our organizations. It also

doesn't allow us to take advantage of the vast amounts of volunteer hours available to those organizations that focus on grassroots fundraising.

Isn't our base asked to give to many other groups? Do they have money for us?

- It's true that people are asked to give by others and yes, they will give to them **because they are asked**. When we don't ask, we are out of the equation! We are depriving people the chance to learn about our work and be part of it by giving.
- Actually, very few people give to only one organization working on the issues they care about. It stands to reason that someone who gives to allied groups would also be interested in what we are doing. If we ask 100 people, only a minority are going to say no because they are asked to give by too many people.
- Some will surely say yes! And those who do say no are likely to say it because we're just not a priority to them (something that can be addressed in a number of ways) or because their personal and family finances are stretched in general.
- In fact, some of our base is not asked very much at all by social justice groups or non-profits in general. For example, monolingual immigrants receive very few requests by mail, email or personal asks by social justice groups.