

The Power of Stories

Planned Giving Mentor

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Everyone has a story. Each of us has arrived at our current place in life because of a series of events, of associations, or relationships, even of adventures, that determine who we are, what is important to us, and what our priorities for the future may be. Those stories also determine, at least in part, which charities we will support and how our philanthropic interests interact with the other priorities in our lives.

Not only do we each have a story. We each love to tell our story. And telling the story is even more compelling when someone else truly wants to listen. What could be more important in the cultivation of prospects than a genuine interest in what prospects are saying about themselves? What better way to learn what excites them, where their passions lie and what their priorities are than by encouraging them and by paying attention to their stories?

Stories, of course, come in many versions. And the questions we ask can elicit the chapters of our donors' stories that are of most interest to us. "How did you first become associated with Charity X?" or "What are the things that most excite you about the work we are doing, and why?" are great ways of encouraging donors to tell the parts of their stories that relate to our work in philanthropy. How often have we all been surprised by what those stories contain? How often did something that happened years ago become a key turning point in the life story of one of our donors, a turning point that has led her or him again to the present and to the possibility of a gift.

Stories are not only wonderful ways of engaging our donors and of learning what motivates them most intensely; they are also marvelous ways of presenting new gift ideas without a direct (and sometimes intimidating) ask. In this case, we as development professionals are telling the stories and the stories we tell to our donors are about someone else, but someone who looks much like them. In the best cases, the stories we tell are about real people whose issues and perspectives are similar to those of the donors to whom we are talking. In some cases, the stories may be composites of several others. But in all cases, our stories relate what others have done, how they have benefited from their philanthropy and the good they were able to do. Frequently, our listeners can see themselves in the stories about other people and can ask questions about their own circumstances that lead directly to a gift.

I would suggest that stories are the heart of professional (and of effective) cultivation. If we can offer an opportunity for our prospects to tell their stories, if we can listen intently to the stories they tell, and if we can bring the stories of other donors whose stories are similar, we have not only made our prospects feel appreciated but we have also discovered ways of structuring gift plans that derive from the priorities and values of the donor rather than simply the needs of the charity. Almost always, such gifts are larger and are given with more enthusiasm than gifts made solely to meet a short-term need of the charity. And frequently, gifts made as an integral part of the donor's story become the precursors of additional gifts yet to come. All we have to do is listen to the stories.