

What is a Relationship After All?

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“What is a relationship after all?” This straightforward question is one that I have been considering for a few years now. An advancement professional for the past 35 years, I have always believed that we are in a relationship-driven industry. This is true whether the goal is fundraising or external relations. Lately though, I have begun to wonder about our overall understanding of relationships and relationship theories.

We have been in a research age for some time. That is, a data-driven, proof-before-process, one-more-Internet-search age, which is the basis for fundraising and donor contact to commence. Outcomes have become paramount, and the margins for success or failure have produced a higher pressure on advancement staffers to get the information and move on it. Because there appears to be no end to the available details, it's very easy to decide you know a donor or prospect “well enough” and trigger a gift request. Without a doubt, much of this information is likely true and often will work.

So, what is a relationship really worth?

Do we even have the time for relationship-based advancement work? It's not that relationships are ignored or not valued, but relationships demand time and strategies. They must be a part of an internal mission concept for staff. They require training, discussion, and commitment. The idea is to have senior leadership embrace the orientation, mentoring, and education needed in order for relationship-based advancement meet the widening expectations. This means relationships supported by research, not research in search of relationships. If the best fundraising is donor-driven, don't relationships then become magnified in their importance?

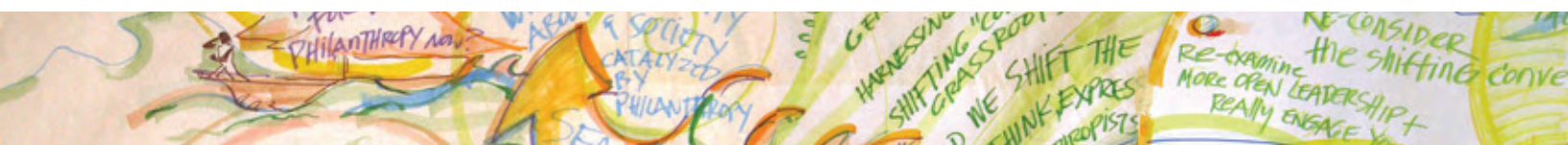
Relationship theories revolve around some clear principles. The first stage is “identification and search.” There are key questions to apply to donors, prospects, and friends.

- What to look for? – Be alert at the office, the home, the event.
- Where to look? – Existing donors, board contacts, etc.
- Why do this? – To find the connections, the keys.
- Things to remember? – What is unique, new, confirmed, set.

The outcomes that come from a relationship search like this are to know individuals and organizations from a connections perspective. What drives or has driven these donors and prospects to where they are? What are they still searching for or trying to fulfill? How can they be assisted, and in assisting them, aid staff as well?

The second stage is “cultivation and management.” The process has begun; now it must be continued through creativity, a high degree of listening, and always being on alert for ways to advance the relationship to another level. While this is going on, it is vital that those engaged are being sincere, being truthful, and being themselves, yet representing their interests. Relationships don't exist without reason.

The third stage is “qualify and assess.” It is at this point where relationships must stand up to another series of questions, all designed to challenge the relationship's ultimate worth.



Goals

- Support the goals of the organization
- Support the goals of the office
- Support individual goals
- Communicate and report on goal status

Respect

- Respect endorsed plans
- Respect endorsed goals
- Respect individual ideas
- Respect experience and authority

Responses

- Understand your strengths and weaknesses
- Take things seriously
- Meet all challenges directly
- Be honest in all your endeavors

Accountability

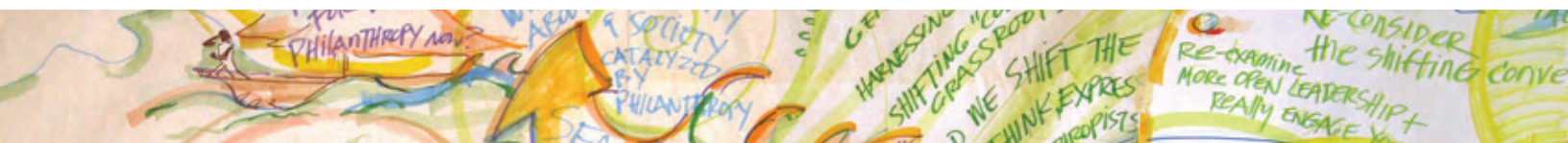
- Be accountable as an individual
- Be accountable as a team member
- Be accountable as an office colleague
- Be accountable as a professional

I have found these terms to help sustain and motivate both senior and rookie staff members. They center on the importance of plans, goals, respect, response, and accountability. They further the notion of an “A-Team” in terms of how to project and explain a relationship-based system into any organization or institution.

An A-Team Listing

- Academic – Research and review
- Awareness – Elements of personal conduct
- Action – Service driven
- Attitude – Dedication to those professional accountability terms
- Achievement – Successes now and into the future

“What is a relationship after all?” It’s a vital, exciting, fluid circumstance, unique in all ways. In my opinion, it’s something we cannot give up, and must promote now more than ever. It’s so worth it.



Relationships: demand time and attention.

Relationships: return the advancement process to a personal level, not just focused on the goals or objectives involved.

Relationships: very real the ageless quote, "Ideas are a dime a dozen, but people who put them into action are priceless!"

Relationships: work. They always did.

**Ideas are a dime a dozen.
People who put them into action are priceless**



About this extract

In Spring 2009, Gary Hubbell Consulting convened a think tank of North American nonprofit organization and development leaders. Four topics were selected for discussion, each of which became the focus of an insightful essay by each of the hand-picked attendees. The four topics are: New Perspectives on Leadership, Reimagining the Future of Philanthropy, Development in a Systems Context, and Demonstrating and Communicating Philanthropy's Impact. The resulting e-book, *In Search of New Meaning: Philanthropy, Community and Society*, is available for free download at www.OnTheCuspPublishing.com. This essay is an extract from that publication.

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