

## Achieving Authentic Engagement: The Key to Raising More Money

In his classic book, *Relationship Fundraising*, Ken Burnett wrote that development and advancement professionals in the 1980s primarily marketed and sold to their donors. The central belief back then was that the goal was to create philanthropic transactions as opposed to ongoing and deeper relationships with donors. Today, most thoughtful development and advancement professionals would agree that such a philosophy and approach is ineffectual at best and antagonistic at worst. Simply put, we understand that donors do not appreciate being “told and sold.” Instead, donors respond much more generously and offer their best possible gifts when they are afforded the opportunity to participate more fully in supporting a mission and vision that matters to them.

Interestingly, though, if one looks closely at the state of our advancement profession today, many of the same skills found in the outdated and unsuccessful “tell and sell” strategy continue to be promoted and utilized. As an example, many gift officers will assert that having a well-crafted case statement is vital to visiting with a donor, even during the early phases of donor cultivation. The reason for this belief is tied to the misguided notion that the most important purpose of a donor visit is to share the plans and needs of the institution.

Similarly, if one attends any major advancement or development conference today there remain far more opportunities to learn about “telling your story,” and “crafting your case for support,” than there are about the “art of inquiry,” or “listening better.”

The concept of “telling and selling,” it would seem, lives on.

Not only do we continue to practice and focus on outdated methodologies in building our donor relationships, we also struggle to define a better path forward with our most capable donors. For instance, as an alternative to “telling and selling,” one would be hard-pressed to identify a more over-used phrase in the advancement field today than “donor engagement.” We are bombarded with encouragement to “engage more donors,” to spend more time in “donor engagement” activities, and to create more specific plans to “engage donors” through various activities and events.

But what does “donor engagement” actually mean? Is “donor engagement,” best defined as involving a donor in some kind of volunteer experience? Or, is a donor invited to an event understood to be “engaged”? Or, does “donor engagement” simply mean they are on our mailing list? And, once a clear understanding of the term is achieved, a more important question becomes, how can you and your team do it better?

Whether you are engaging a donor through an event, personal visit, volunteer experience, survey, or via some other approach, there are specific skills which need to be developed to enhance the experience and achieve a more productive outcome. It is one thing to agree that “donor engagement” is important to raising more money and a wholly different thing to develop the skills to do it effectively. This issue of the *Bulletin* will focus on the most important of the skills leading to the authentic engagement of your donors – the skill of listening effectively.

### The Silent Skill: Listening

Most will agree that listening to donors (or listening in general), is important to success. However, as pointed out earlier, we rarely find opportunities in the advancement profession to learn how to listen better. Perhaps this disconnect is tied to the fact that when we listen we are seen as being inactive or passive. We aren’t really doing much when we listen, it would seem. Listening isn’t so much a skill to be learned, some might say, as opposed to a demeanor one should adopt.

But listening – deep, productive listening – absolutely is a skill that can be (and should be) strengthened and refined over time. And when advancement leaders aim to strengthen the engagement of their donors, no skill is more important.

### The Art of Inquiry: Where Listening Begins

Good, thoughtful, helpful listening begins, in many instances, when a companion skillset is activated: asking insightful, encouraging questions. Gonser Gerber LLP calls this skillset the Art of Inquiry.

We would define the Art of Inquiry as:

**The gentle art of relationship-building by asking well-crafted questions based on your genuine interest in the other person and to which you do not already know the answer.**

The Art of Inquiry is focused on building relationships by asking good questions based on a sincere curiosity in the other person. This means that the questions are not leading, diagnostic, nor attempting to make a point. Instead, Art of Inquiry questions are authentically-asked, open-ended, and intended to create better understanding.

When we practice the Art of Inquiry, we show donors we are interested in them as whole people, we gain far more information, and, as research suggests, donors leave the experience thinking more highly of us and trusting us more. Each of these results from practicing the Art of Inquiry helps to encourage greater generosity with our donors.

There are three characteristics of the questions that one should employ when practicing the Art of Inquiry:

1. First, to invite deeper discussion, the question should be open-ended without the infusion of assumptions. Questions that can be answered with a simple "yes/no," usually will be. Instead of asking, "Wasn't that an enjoyable event?" a better question might be, "What was the most enjoyable part of the event for you?"
2. Second, questions in a conversation should transition naturally from one to another. A particular strategy is to use a part of the previous answer or statement from the donor to frame the next question. Connecting the questions this way shows the donor you are fully listening to their answers and not simply working through a script of pre-determined questions.
3. Finally, each question should be allowed to breathe on its own. Far too often, we ask questions and then jump in with additional comments before the donor has a chance to fully respond. Get comfortable with the pauses and dead air of interactions. If you are asking good, thoughtful questions, people sometimes need a moment to respond. Offer them that courtesy.

Below are some helpful examples of questions that, when asked regularly, will help you get into a more disciplined practice of utilizing the Art of Inquiry with donors:

- ◆ Where/from whom did you learn to be generous?
- ◆ What do you think of our institution/program?
- ◆ What has been the single, most important source of your success?
- ◆ Why did you first give to our institution?
- ◆ What about giving do you most enjoy?
- ◆ What change/outcome/impact would you like to see result from your giving?
- ◆ How does your giving reflect your values?

You will note, of course, that none of the above questions are focused on the message or story that you might want to tell. The Art of Inquiry is not a ruse for "telling and selling" better. Instead, each question is designed to gain a deeper, more insightful understanding of the donor. When we do this well first, we stand a much better chance of successfully linking their passions, values, and beliefs to a giving opportunity later.

It needs to be pointed out, though, that it can be difficult for development and advancement professionals to solicit feedback or ask open-ended questions. We may not like the responses or may not know what to do with the responses once the question is posed. It is important to keep in mind, though, that practicing the Art of Inquiry, in-and-of-itself, is a pathway to building trust and a deeper relationship with a donor.

If, for instance, we ask the question, "What do you think about our institution today?" and we receive an answer containing a laundry list of negative attributes and things we should be doing better, our initial, knee-jerk reaction might be to try to get out of that conversation as quickly as possible or to respond defensively. Neither of these responses would be the most helpful. Instead, listening and asking for examples or specifics so that we more fully understand the concerns (practicing natural transitions with your questions), would be much more helpful.

For many people, having the opportunity to share their concern is what matters most. They desire to be heard. Therefore, the content of any answer to a question you might pose, while potentially difficult to hear (or, conversely, very positive), can be much less important than what is communicated to the donor by simply asking the question.

## Listening Better

Once the Art of Inquiry is being practiced regularly, you will gain even more positive results by learning how to listen effectively. We can expend the creative energy to frame and ask good questions and have it all be for naught if we fail to listen well.

To understand how to listen better, we must first understand the various types of listening that we can exhibit. Communications researchers and scholars have helped develop what is referred to as the "Listening Continuum" which was refined and made more popular by Stephen Covey in his book, *The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit*. The "Listening Continuum" includes the following five phases of listening:

LISTENING CONTINUUM	
Phase 5: Empathic Listening	Within the Other's Frame of Reference
Phase 4: Attentive Listening	Within One's Own Frame of Reference
Phase 3: Selective Listening	
Phase 2: Pretend Listening (Patronizing)	
Phase 1: Ignoring	

### Phase 1: Ignoring

One person is talking or communicating and the other person is receiving the information, but is not acknowledging the communication in any way.

### Phase 2: Pretend Listening

The listener attempts to signal that they are listening, but they truly are not present. The listener in this instance may nod their head while looking away.

### Phase 3: Selective Listening

The listener only wants to hear part of the message. The listener in this instance may be quick to interrupt.

### Phase 4: Attentive Listening

The listener gives their full attention to what is being said and communicated. The listener in this instance may orient their body so that they face the other person more fully.

### Phase 5: Empathic Listening

The listener not only gives their full attention to what is being said and communicated, but also to the meaning behind what is being said and communicated. The listener in this instance attempts to "walk in the shoes of the other," so that a deeper understanding is established.

## Empathic Listening: Understanding

Phases 1 through 4 are all characterized by listening within our own frame of reference. In other words, we are listening to others based on our assumptions, our preferences, or our worldviews. Phase 5, though, is differentiated because the listener attempts to see the communication through the eyes and experiences of the communicator. As Stephen Covey writes,

**"To truly listen means to transcend your autobiography, to get out of your own frame of reference, out of your own value system, out of your own history and judging tendencies, and to get deeply into the frame of reference or viewpoint of another person. This is called empathic listening."**

From a development and advancement perspective, the happy by-product of practicing empathic listening is that donors sense that they are being valued at a much deeper level. They do not feel as though they are being viewed solely as a bank account or gift giver. They complain less that the only time the institution contacts them is when the institution wants money. Instead, they are inspired to learn more, participate more, and give more generously.

To practice the skill of listening for meaning, as well as content – to listen empathically in other words – there are three areas to master.

1. **Listening with your whole body** – orient yourself fully to the speaker, eyes on them, shoulders square to them, be quiet and still. While this may sound like an elementary school learning theme, many people today struggle to remove mobile phones and other distractions from important interactions.
2. **Listening first to understand, not to respond** – what is the meaning behind what they are saying to you? This is much more important than attempting to craft your response before they have finished their point.
3. **Providing encouraging responses** – when it is time to respond, the goal is to show understanding of their perspectives and advance the discussion in a helpful way. For instance, restating their words in your response clearly signals you are listening to them. Additionally, adding a helpful, “from what I’ve heard you say, a good next step might be for us to . . .” can keep the conversation moving forward productively and, ultimately, to the point of deepening their engagement.

## Conclusion

Recently, the Giving USA Foundation published their annual *Giving USA 2016* report which estimates the total amount of giving in the United States. In addition to their estimates on total giving, they also include multi-decade data on total charitable giving in the U.S. as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Unfortunately, the analysis of this longitudinal data is not encouraging.

Specifically, what the Giving USA Foundation has reported is that total charitable giving in the U.S. as a percentage of GDP has averaged about 1.85% during the 40 years between 1975 and 2015. While this number is significantly higher than any other country’s percentage, the discouraging news is that it has been essentially flat during those 40 years.

In other words, while total charitable giving in the U.S. has grown during that period, it only has done so because of the growth in the economy. Donors are not giving more as a percentage of what they have to give. Instead, it is the expansion of the economy that has driven increases in U.S. total charitable giving.

A few years ago, Adam Meyerson, the President of the Philanthropy Roundtable, an organization dedicated to protecting philanthropic freedom and fostering excellence in philanthropy nationally, was asked how charitable giving in the United States could move above the stubborn 1.85%-2.0% mark of GDP. His response didn’t focus on tax reform, nor did it focus on providing more incentives so donors would want to give more. Instead, he said that if institutions and organizations want to raise significantly more money, they need to

**“ . . . capture the philanthropic imagination of the American people . . . and appeal to American’s highest values and aspirations, not their guilt.”**

We will not fully capture people’s philanthropic imagination nor appeal to their highest values and aspirations by “telling and selling” to them. No, in order to achieve these outcomes, we need to authentically engage our donors through a disciplined practice of the Art of Inquiry and, then, listen empathically. And while mastering and practicing both of these skills take significant personal and creative energy, as well as institutional patience, the rewards for all involved are deep, significant, and long-lasting.