

How to Ask for Money During a Crisis

By Joan Garry



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It was June 15, my first day as executive director of a nonprofit. I learned that we had \$360 in the bank, hundreds of thousands of dollars in overdue bills, and 18 full-time staff members. I had no fundraising experience.

Believe it or not, this story ends happily. Through a team effort, we (fundraisers, the finance department, and the board) dug our “organizational truck” out of the ditch. To do it, we had to ask for money while we were in crisis.

It wasn't ideal, but “ideal” wasn't an option. We made it work — in just six months — without laying off anyone. We paid all our bills, and our board was engaged and excited. Most important, we created a vision for the future and raised the money to move toward it.

Today's crises are unlike any other in modern history, and nonprofits are feeling the full impact. Many nonprofit workers who are suffering because of the brutal killing of George Floyd are also busier than ever working to end racial injustice. The economic collapse caused by Covid-19 has crippled many groups, and everyone is reeling from the pandemic. Time and again, I hear this question: Can I ask for money in the midst of all this?

Yes.

Is it easy to ask for money from a place of desperation? No.

I know what it means to raise money from a place of desperation. When I was leading that organization on the edge of insolvency, we had one unforgettable dinner with a donor. My

development director and I knew the donor could make a big gift, and we were all set to request \$25,000. A lot was riding on that gift.

The donor suggested a lovely restaurant, way too “lovely.” I spent as much time envisioning the “check dance” at the end of the meal as I did prepping for the conversation. It turns out, we didn’t have to worry. Our guest picked up the tab. She also pledged to give \$25,000 and then, with such generosity, asked if there would be some value in her wiring this gift directly to our account tomorrow? We casually agreed this might be helpful. We were not as casual as we danced a quick jig in the parking lot.

How did we do it? Here’s what we learned about how to ask for support during a crisis.

Build excitement about the destination. Did you ever pack up a carload of kids for a long drive to a terrific vacation spot? The thrill of the destination is what gets them through. You’ll see the kids — between playing video games on a Switch and bickering with a sibling — gaze out the window and daydream. They are thinking about the destination. When their bickering becomes too much to bear, and to trigger their excitement, you may ask what they’ll do when they arrive. Then the mantra begins: Are we there yet?

Inherent in that question is anticipation and excitement. Donors aren’t much different. My friend Jim Langley is an expert in donor psychology, and I swallowed this lesson from him whole. A donor becomes motivated to give not by taking a boring car ride but by learning about the destination.

You may be sweating payroll and experiencing existential threats to your work, but pick up your head from that cash-flow statement and look down the road. Describe what is possible in terms of need and impact when we get to “the other side.”

When you ask for money, frame the gift as a bridge from where you are now to what’s possible. That framing motivates donors and ignites their passion for your work. You may even get a call in six months asking: Are we there yet? If not, how can I help?

Nurture, nurture, and then nurture some more. You’re probably thinking, I don’t have time to nurture. I need the money now. Well, you have staff and board members to help. Just get on the phone, and check in on your volunteers and donors. Check on them. That’s it. If they ask about the organization, see the next section. Keep your organizational family close and their mission fires burning. And don’t be surprised if folks respond with, How can I help?

Brag, don’t beg. It is time for a little creativity. Try getting a group of college students off their cellphones and put them to work interviewing clients, creating short videos, building an inventory of

social-media content for board members to share with their networks.

Try organizing a board meeting in which trustees practice their storytelling skills by sharing stories of the remarkable work you are accomplishing in spite of this incomprehensible crisis. Share the heroics as well as details people might not know. For example, if your nonprofit runs an equine-therapy program, you could explain how expensive it is to maintain stables and horses even though riders can't leave their homes.

Bring the work to life. Even if folks can't give now, you will ignite their passion. You will remind them that good things are happening led by very good people. We could all use a dose of that medicine right now.

Find oxygen canisters. I stole this line from Jim Collins who wrote a terrific book called *Good to Great*. He also wrote a lesser-known gem called *Great by Choice*. In it, he offers findings from studying organizations that managed to thrive in disruption and uncertainty. He joined me recently on my podcast and talked about hunting for "oxygen canisters," things that give nonprofit leaders extra fuel. They are forms of support besides money. For example, media coverage may help generate donations; perhaps you can find a pro bono consultant to help you get coverage. Hiring college students, as mentioned earlier, is another way to fuel your trip to the other side of this pandemic without blowing your budget.

Don't let yourself be deterred. Lastly, some board members may try to dissuade you from seeking gifts right now. They'll say it's not appropriate when millions are out of work or suffering in other ways. In response, I say these three things.

- If you focus only on cutting expenses to make it through this crisis, you will hit an organizational muscle or vein, and your organization will become weaker, its impact diminished. Your clients and your cause deserve better. Plus, it is mighty likely that your work is needed now more than ever.
- It's your job to ask.
- When people give money to causes that they believe in, it makes them feel good — about themselves and about the world. Don't deny them that opportunity.

I'd love this article to generate a conversation. How is fundraising and adapting to the crisis going? Share a success or a challenge. Disagree with me. (I can take it.) I'll respond to every comment. I know we have a lot to teach each other.

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This article is part of:

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