

# HOW TO HAVE A REAL CONVERSATION WITH A DONOR

*by Julie Whelan Capell*

“In sales, you don’t have to actually believe in the product or service you are hawking. That is not true of fundraising, at least not if you’re doing it right!” – *Tori O’Neal-McElrath*

Fundraising is not the same as sales. Some executive directors and many board members come from a background where sales are a huge part of the corporate culture. I've seen this result in a situation where the donor feels like they are talking to a used car salesman.

Conversely, I was working recently with a leader who was so afraid of being "sales-ey" that she was leaving her passion behind and ended up sounding like a robot on donor calls.

So how can you get to meaningful conversations with donors?

I like the way Tori O’Neal-McElrath--respected fundraising author, consultant and NAACP Director of External Affairs--says it’s all about what you believe.

## **You have to be a true believer in your organization’s ability to make an impact**

We can all tell the difference between someone who is passionate about a cause and someone who is just going through the motions. That’s why it’s important to let your passion for the mission of your organization shine in any conversation. It will help if you have clarity about your own story, why you work for the organization, and why you believe the organization is making a difference to the community it serves. Opening up and telling your personal story is a wonderful way to have a conversation that is intimate rather than transactional.

## **You must believe in those your organization serves**

You are the bridge between the donor and the people/animals/environment that will benefit from the donor’s support. Some donors will be familiar with the population your organization works with, but there is little chance they will know more than you. This is why it is important for everyone--fundraising staff, executive directors, board members, and others—to have direct contact with program participants. You need to deeply understand not only the challenges faced by your participants, but also their strengths. You must be able to tell their personal stories because they will seldom be in a position to argue their own case before individual major donors or foundations.

## **You need to believe in the funder/donor**

This means doing your homework ahead of time to understand the donor's history with your organization as well as his/her background (work experience, family, donations to others, etc.). But more importantly, it means asking the donor questions about their own beliefs. Ask what they are passionate about, what they think the community issues are, and what they think some solutions might be. Ask if they have worked with other nonprofits they thought were particularly effective and why. If the person has an existing relationship with your organization, ask for candid feedback on how they feel about the work you do, the communication they receive, and the progress they have seen (or not seen) over the years. If you listen carefully to the answers without jumping to defend yourself or your organization, you may be surprised at what you will learn.

In the case of the leader I was working with who was afraid of being sales-ey, what worked for her was remembering that supporters of the organization WANT to hear her talk with passion about her work. That it's okay to be yourself, toot your own horn, and play up the accomplishments of your organization. Once she got comfortable letting more of herself into the conversation, dialog became much easier and the gifts started coming in.

If you bring these beliefs to your next donor conversation, you will come into the dialog from a place of conviction for your own story, that of your participants, and also that of the donor; an ideal foundation for a truly meaningful conversation.

Reference:

O'Neal-McElrath, Tori: "[Some Say Fundraising is Just Sales: They're Wrong!](#)" Blue Avocado 9/22/18