

The Impact of Major Gifts and the Importance of Broad Participation

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Imagine that you are the president of one of our Jewish communal institutions, e.g., a synagogue, Jewish community center, etc., which has identified \$10 million in capital and endowment needs. Your organization moves forward with a major fundraising initiative to secure the necessary funding and as you begin your campaign, two donors step forward, each making a \$5 million dollar commitment. Now, having met your identified needs, your campaign is complete, right? Wrong.

Given that most individuals focus on the dollar goal, many would be tempted to end their campaign at that point. And while that would meet the absolute financial needs of your institution, it would also be a major missed opportunity to strengthen your organization. At this point, any good development professional would advise you that, given these large gifts, not only should you continue the campaign but you should raise your campaign goal! I would agree with that advice but my reasoning may be a little different.

This is not to minimize the impact of major gifts. The old adage that most of the funds raised come from a small percentage is still true. Development professionals often say that 80% of gifts come from 20% of the donors; sometimes the ratio is 90/10! Without these major gifts, our organizations would be hard pressed to meet their financial needs. But there are additional and significant objectives that can be met during the course of a major fundraising campaign that will strengthen your organization for decades to come.

Organizations perform at their optimal level when not only are their books balanced, but when there is a broad level of involvement – with each individual feeling a sense of engagement and connection. A properly executed major fundraising campaign is not just about raising funds but also serves as a vehicle to build community.

Community is forged as individuals work together towards a common goal and increase their involvement with the institution. While people may enter through different doors, broad involvement leads to stronger community. So how does fundraising fit into this paradigm?

More than ever before, today's donors look at their philanthropy as investments in the current or future success of the organization. Similar to an investment in a business, donors follow their gifts. How does this manifest itself? Contributors may attend more events, track the progress and impact of their donations, and/or become involved in the governance of the organization. Community-building becomes the reward that parallels the

dollars raised. Increased engagement develops future leaders and promotes additional philanthropy.

This outcome – a more involved and cohesive community – is not a function of the size of an individual gift. Rather it is a result of wider participation in a common goal: your campaign. Properly executed, major fundraising campaigns should have two clear objectives – the dollar amount to be raised and the highest possible number of participants (investors). When a large percentage of your stakeholders unite around a shared purpose, your organization is enriched.

Recently, we had the opportunity to provide fundraising counsel to a synagogue that was formed by the merger of two congregations. As the campaign started, congregants continued to identify themselves as being from one of the legacy congregations and not the newly formed entity. As the campaign moved forward, and congregants began to make investments in the new Temple, issues from the merger began to decline in importance. As participation in the campaign grew and congregants made their commitments to the newly combined entity, affinities began to change. The lines of demarcation began to disappear and members began to view themselves as part of the new congregation. To be sure, the congregation engaged in the campaign because of identified financial needs. However, because they were able to attract broad participation, a new and stronger community emerged.

Jewish wisdom tells us that “you never deny an individual the opportunity to perform a *mitzvah*.” Wise indeed. That alone should propel our Jewish organizations to offer the opportunity for participation to the widest group possible. But from a more pragmatic viewpoint, when you spread a wide net, you not only provide the opportunity for all to perform mitzvot, you secure necessary financial support while strengthening your community.

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