

Kay Sprinkel Grace: An Outstanding Fundraising Professional

By Khesia Taylor

Earlier this year, Kay Sprinkel Grace, FAFP, was named the 2020 Outstanding Fundraising Professional—the highest honor that AFP bestows upon members. The award recognizes effective, creative leaders who practice and promote ethical fundraising. A consultant, author, international speaker, and one of the most respected names in fundraising, she has been an active engaged member of AFP since 1980, serving on both her local and the international AFP board. In this interview, she talks about her career as a fundraiser, how to navigate the pandemic, and words of advice to individuals new to the profession.



Kay Sprinkel Grace, FAFP

This issue of the magazine focuses on topics “beyond fundraising,” such as self-care, inspiration, and others. What are some areas that fundraisers should focus on to enhance their skills?

“Beyond fundraising” is an idea near and dear to my heart, and something I believe in deeply. I titled my first book *Beyond Fundraising*, which seemed like a very bold statement in 1997. If we go “beyond fundraising” in our work and our communities, we can fully realize the potential of philanthropy to change lives. Successful fundraising is the endpoint on a continuum to which we are committed by our profession. It requires an integrity-based process whereby we inform, engage, partner, steward and continually renew relationships with people who share our values and believe in our mission.

We are more than fundraisers; that is only part of what we do. Our organizations are a vital sector of the economy, and we possess the trust, integrity, reputation and experience to be leaders and catalysts for community development. We need to be at the table—particularly as we emerge from this pandemic—helping to design inclusive solutions for the challenges in our communities. Crises attract significant attention and funding, but when they pass, those same issues become chronic, so our voices must continue to be heard. Our unfortunate designation as “charities” has meant that we are too often viewed as recipients waiting for a handout, not as fully engaged partners. We must let people see us for who and what we are—public benefit corporations and leaders in the social sector with a charitable purpose but not as charities.

We also need to view our donors as social investors—generous people and thoughtful funding institutions who have voluntarily moved their money from their financial investment portfolio (whether substantial or modest) to their social investment portfolio. As we emerge from the jarring experience of this pandemic, people will look at the impact of their social and financial investments. We must start to make our role as fundraisers more clear and work diligently to make sure they hear our voices.

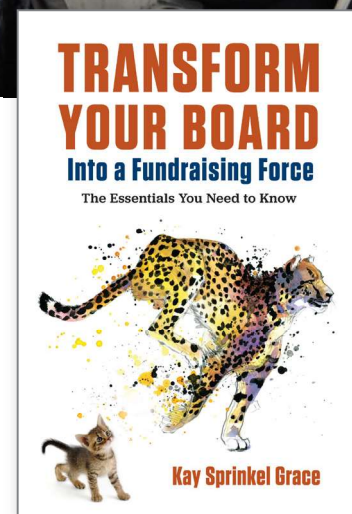
Fundraising is something we do, but it is not what we are. It's very important to have a robust toolkit. Going beyond fundraising means a changed perception of our value, worth and role in society. Too often, I meet people in this profession who are apologetic about what they do. We should be so joyful about what we do because we are dream brokers. We connect the dreams of the community with organizations that can act on those dreams. We are capable of leading transformation in communities, people, and organizations, and that exceeds the usual assumption about fundraising as transactional. We have deep roots in our communities. By going beyond fundraising, we become recognized for the truly powerful “third sector” that we are.

You started your consulting firm Transforming Philanthropy more than 30 years ago, what has been the key to your success?

My only equity since the beginning has been my reputation, so I have worked hard to make sure that every engagement is productive and regarded as mutually successful. I place a high priority on integrity and trust, which I consider a two-way agreement. Before starting my own business, I was a major gifts officer, so relationships are the heart of my work. I care deeply about my clients and their goals, and we work from a Letter of Agreement that is clear about the scope of work and deliverables.

I have also been careful not to overload so I can serve clients well. Although I've worked with other independent contractors in my business, most of my work has been as a sole proprietor. This allows me to roll out my work over a year in three distinct areas: ongoing consultation with regular clients, board retreats or workshops, and speaking at conferences. It has been the right balance for me.

The best feedback I get is my ongoing relationship with clients. I have clients I've worked with for more than 15 years, and I recently started working with a client I worked with 25 years ago.



One thing that comes with age and years in the profession is a certain level of wisdom that clients like to turn to when they need help with a problem. I enjoy those kinds of conversations and consultations because it allows me to keep paying it forward. If I can plant and nurture seeds of inspiration or boldness, it energizes my thinking, too.

You are a trailblazer in the fundraising profession where men predominantly hold leadership roles. What advice do you have for women who aspire to leadership, and what can the fundraising sector do to put more women into executive positions?

This is one of the ironies of our profession. At the beginning of our growth, in the late 1950s and 1960s, development directors were mostly men. I suspect this is because the early rise of development as a profession began in U.S. universities, and then other countries became early adapters of our development models. Then, we had a surge of women entering the workforce, and they saw that women were great relationship builders.

We all saw the growing “feminization” of our profession, and soon we were the largest percentage of people in development, particularly in community-based organizations. But concerns grew about the “glass ceiling.” So my observation at the time was that as long as men were the majority of the major donors and led the majority of foundations, organizations did not think that women could be top major giving officers or vice presidents for development.

Now that women are driving much of major giving—with money they have created, inherited or managed for others—this pattern should shift. There is still a long way to go, and I believe we can mitigate the problem if women donors speak up and speak out to encourage organizations to hire women at the top of the development team.

How has your board engagement program (Ambassador, Advocate, Asker “AAA”) helped to transform how boards think about fundraising? And what are some of those strategies?

A former client—the executive director of a community college foundation whose board consisted of 39 people—inspired the “AAA” model. She called me one day and said she was concerned because she only had seven board members who were willing to ask [for money]. I told her that I thought that was a miracle. But her real concern was, “What do I do with the other 32?” I began to think about the “other 32.” If a board member can’t or won’t directly ask for money, what role can they play in resource development?

My answer to her was, ‘they can fill many roles.’ My client and I developed a checklist, divided at the time into steward, recruiter and asker. We listed activities that needed to be done that year in each category, and then we let the board members choose what they wanted to do. It turned out to be the best fundraising year ever, with the highest board member engagement.

That early beta test led to Ambassador, Advocate and Asker, using the same principles of allowing people to select the tasks they want to do based on the development or strategic plan. It is a management tool that allows organizations to see who has signed up for what. It’s all based on volunteers working in their “confidence zone” and doing what they know how and like to do. Because people choose their tasks, they end up do it with less prodding.

As we adapt to a new way of working among COVID-19, what should fundraisers do to keep up with fundraising efforts during this challenging time?

Communicate. Show gratitude. Keep people informed. Offer them opportunities to give, and don’t worry about being perceived as “tone-deaf.” Looking at what has been raised by food banks and other essential human services shows that we are a culture that wants to help. We are true philanthropists; we love humankind. When organizations go dark on social media or halt fundraising because of this, I lament their future. Be sensitive. Assure your donors that you understand if this is not a good time for them.

Also, be savvy about grants that may be available during this time of recovery. Engage your major donors in virtual meetings for updates with your CEO or program directors. Let your donors know that things will continue to move forward and that you value them. They will appreciate being informed in a special way.

What advice do you have for people new to the field or looking to advance their careers?

As you begin your work in fundraising, or think about advancing, assess the alignment of your values with those of the organization you choose. If you are a naturally grateful person, find out if there is a culture of gratitude. How do they thank people inside the organization as well as in the community? If you are a person who requires support and encouragement to advance, find out how they give feedback and what that feedback looks like. If caring for others by showing respect in the workplace is important to you, assess that aspect of their culture.

Most importantly, assess whether the organization has a true culture of philanthropy or if it’s only a division on its own that generates funds for the rest of the organization. A culture of philanthropy is where everyone—from the receptionist to the board—understands they play a role and where they see your work as an integral part of their overall impact in the community. It is a place where everyone is essential to building and maintaining relationships, creating an environment where volunteers and donors feel welcome and respected.

Many development professionals with whom I have worked have burned out because of a misalignment with the values and culture. In a supportive environment, where the culture of philanthropy is felt and practiced throughout, the challenges pale when they assess the *results*.

As the 2020 Outstanding Fundraising Professional, what do you hope to inspire in other fundraisers?

1. **Passion** for philanthropy and an unwavering commitment to making sure our world emerges from the pandemic better than before. A desire to form partnerships to create stronger communities that are resilient and capable of tackling whatever challenge with resolve and exceptional innovation.
2. **Courage** to reimagine our future as a society and the willingness to “encourage the heart” in your staff and volunteers.
3. **Knowledge** that we are powerful enough to inspire, lift, engage, unite and advance our mission, vision and values to encourage others to join us.
4. **Renewed commitment** to the foundation principles of the public benefit sector: ethics, integrity, inclusiveness and continued professional development.
5. **Realization** that you don’t have to be the leader to lead. Whether you are a development associate, database manager or the director of development, you can demonstrate leadership qualities.
6. **The desire** to go “beyond fundraising.” When we go beyond fundraising—becoming innovators not just implementers—we can transform our communities through an encompassing practice of all the aspects of philanthropy—the love of humankind.

Your book, *Beyond Fundraising: New Strategies for Innovation and Investment in Nonprofits*, is still widely used among fundraising professionals. How can this book help fundraisers even though it is more than 10 years old? How were you able to write a book about new strategies for innovation that is still relevant today?

Beyond Fundraising has had a very long shelf life. The book covers the three areas that are essential to solid professional practice:


1. Philosophical (mission, vision, values)
2. Strategic (plans, goals, volunteer engagement)
3. Tactical (specific lists, grids, charts and models to guide daily practice)

The main reason for the long shelf life is that the big ideas are common sense inferences based on observation of communities, donors and my professional colleagues. Although I wrote it early in my career as a former

journalist, I was taught the importance of listening and observation. My long community experience as a volunteer gave me another filter that I think has been key to the book’s enduring respect. Volunteers enjoy reading it, too, because they know I have been a volunteer and have shared their experience.

In the Afterword of the Second Edition, I closed the last chapter with these words: “*We must be stewards of the gifts we receive, the gifts of money and gifts of heart. Build those relationships. Carry your passion so it is inspiring to others, remembering that commitment is sustained passion. You will then travel beyond fundraising and know the value and results of development.*”

I’ve been traveling ever since. It is a never-ending quest for solutions to crises and chronic issues and ways to enrich culture, education and the human experience. Thanks for joining me on that journey.

To read the full interview with Kay Sprinkel Grace, visit the AFP Global website and click the “*Advancing Philanthropy*” tab under “Tools & Resources.” 

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