



# The Skill Every Fundraiser Needs: Cultural Wisdom

It's one of the most vital things you can learn. Here's how to get started.

By Lilya Wagner

**W**hat's one of the three main skills every nonprofit leader needs? According to a *Harvard Business Review* article, it's the ability to act in ways that other cultures find appropriate.<sup>1</sup>

In a nation growing ever more diverse, it's critical to broaden the definition of philanthropy to include traditions, preferences, and ways of giving by diverse populations and discard the "one size fits all" mentality. Today's "want ad" might say: "Wanted: fundraisers whose entrepreneurial spirit, cross-cultural knowledge, and analytical abilities match their skills in building strong personal ties to donors."

As immigrant populations increase, they grow in influence and resources. We call these ethnic groups *identity-based donors* because understanding their unique identities is essential to forming relationships with them. These donors are creating new philanthropic networks that resemble their cultures.

Some minority groups haven't attained the income levels of the majority population, but there are signs of emerging wealth and untapped purchasing power. It makes sense to conduct responsible prospect research that includes not just the basics but the additional layers of information that help secure funds from diverse sources – often sources that have been ignored or not tapped in appropriate ways.

## How to Raise Your Cultural Intelligence Quotient

Understanding the giving traditions and habits of diverse populations isn't just an add-on; it's a necessity. Not to acknowledge and work with diversity is to ignore much potential income.

The ultimate goal is to become culturally proficient. A culturally intelligent person has the following traits:

- **knowledge** about cultures (facts and cultural traits)

- **awareness** (of yourself and others)
- **specific skills** (behaviors) that help connect people of diverse backgrounds.

Some ways to acquire this proficiency:

- **Ask questions** to identify common beliefs and values among people of each cultural background.
- **Get involved, and interact** with people of each culture.
- **Be courteous and honest** in communications with people from different backgrounds.
- **Identify and understand** people's varying values.
- **Be conscious not only of your words but your body language** (and the emoticons you use while e-mailing and texting) as well.<sup>2</sup>

## How to Gain Support Across a Range of Cultures

The beauty and challenge of identity-based philanthropy is that there's much diversity – in practice, in approaches to generosity, in traditions, and in cultural behaviors. Some concepts to keep in mind:

- **Definitions of philanthropy differ.** People of other cultures see giving in very different ways.
- **Community is highly significant.** If potential donors don't see that philanthropy serves the community, they don't give.

<sup>1</sup> *Harvard Business Review* concluded in "Three Skills Every 21st Century Manager Needs" that "managers must overcome psychological barriers in order to act in ways that other cultures find appropriate."

<sup>2</sup> Books such as *Do's and Taboos Around the World* and *Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands* address the nitty-gritty of communicating across cultures.

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- **Generational differences matter**, as does the amount of time a potential donor or donor group has been in the U.S.
- **Philanthropy is strongly linked** to family and kinship.
- **Religion is important** in shaping philanthropy.
- **Tax considerations and public recognition** are of lesser importance for identity-based prospects than for mainstream America.
- **Customs and traditions** that are part of an ethnic identity also affect philanthropy.
- **Not all strategies or tools work** for all identity-based prospects. Some are more effective than others, as is accessibility to various strategies by prospects.
- **A mainstream organization may not rank high on prospective donors' list** if that organization hasn't served their particular ethnic group. Serve first, then ask.
- **Various views of government and legal systems** may come with immigrants and shape the way they think about generosity, obligation, reciprocity, opportunity, and other aspects of philanthropy.

Internalizing and using the vast information available can be daunting. Where to begin? Start with awareness. Use the above points as reminders of the rich differences our world possesses. Celebrate these differences as you use them in developing your plans and policies.

When considering how potential donors might relate to your requests for support, think about some classic opposites in beliefs and behaviors, which imply a range of characteristics. For example:

- **Some cultures value change**; others embrace tradition.
- **Some look forward** while others revere the past.
- **Rational thinking defines some cultures**, while intuitive thinking is more comfortable for others.

- **Transient friendship may be the norm for some**, while lifelong friendships are of great value to others.
- **Some cultures believe they control their state of being and future**; others have a more fatalistic attitude.
- **Individual versus group identity** is valuable in understanding how some cultures behave.
- **While some cultures encourage questioning**, others demand respect for authority.

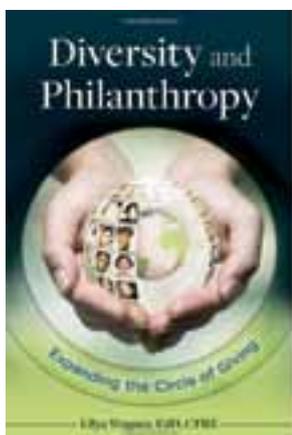
In addition, some fundraising practices are more culturally specific than others. Be especially mindful of cultural identity when recognizing donors, conducting prospect research, and keeping records of donors and prospects.

Perhaps most important of all, look beneath the surface for each culture's core values. Consider those values in planning your outreach to identity-based donors. Understanding different codes of conduct is crucial, because fundraising is, above all, an exchange of values. **S**

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Author Lilya Wagner has worked across the globe as fundraising and nonprofit organizations proliferated in the last 25 years. This book is an outgrowth of her extensive research as well as an accumulation of her professional interactions in the field and real-world knowledge.

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