



Discussing Community Centric Fundraising

With **Maria Rio**



Community Centric Fundraising with Maria Rio

Video 2B Original Video Transcript

Jesse Clarke:

Good afternoon, and welcome to session Unit 2B, and our discussion with a special expert on donor relations, fundraising, and community centered fundraising.

Maria Rio (0:19):

My name is Maria. My pronouns are she and her. Who I am, that's a big question! I guess I can definitely start with, like my bio, if you'd like me to.

Jesse Clarke (0:29)

Yeah, yeah, that would be great. That'd be perfect.

Maria Rio (0:31):

Okay, great. Okay, perfect. So I'd like to talk about my personal story as well as my professional story. But personally, I'm an immigrant. I came to Canada when I was 9 years old, and I lived in a World Vision refugee shelter with my mom and my siblings. It was, of course, very difficult... so we had to access emergency food services, like food banks, drop-in meals. We lived in the shelter. We got Christmas gifts from strangers. All these things that you experience when you're experiencing poverty, plus the challenges of immigration.

So my mom experienced that, transferring over. And, you know, getting picked on in school for speaking with an accent. Kids are brutal, so that personal experience of accessing so many nonprofit services really inspired me to go into nonprofits. So that's why I always love to share that.

So, I started fundraising more than a decade ago when I bumped into people on the street that had vests on, they were doing face to face fundraising for World Vision. So I'm like, wow, I have a personal connection to that brand, and I would love to get started and get involved, which is, I don't think a thought that many people really have, when they see people fundraising on the street, but definitely I was super excited. So, that's how I started my career in fundraising.

Jesse Clarke (2:01)

Well, that's amazing. Thank you for that introduction and for also sharing some of your personal story with us as well. I think it's helpful, because, contextualizing, just for us in terms of what we're talking about today. And you've already touched on a few of the topics that I am looking forward to discussing with you, a lot really in terms of thinking about what does it mean to bring equity and ethics into fundraising and really interrogate the relationship between funders and recipients of funding between organizations, and donors, and really think about how your work as a fundraiser can itself be transformative and really have that kind of impact in changing relationships and empowering communities as well.

I'm wondering if you don't mind if you could just start by maybe talking a bit about what you mean by community centered fundraising, your work on that area specifically, and in reference to that as well, what you're talking about when it comes to creating partnerships.

Maria Rio (2:58)

Yeah, absolutely. So I like to explain community centric fundraising, but also you need the context of donor-centric fundraising to start. So if you don't have that, you're not gonna get the rest. I have to start there.

So donor-centered fundraising is traditional fundraising models. As you know, it's galas, naming buildings after people, it's really centering the relationship building only on the donors. So asking them like, what do you want the programs to look like? If you give me money, it will look that way. And really catering to what a fundraiser imagines a donor wants, even if the donors are not asking to you know, have the building named after them? The fundraiser will offer it, and they'll, you know, send flowers to your home, which all of this sounds great, of course, right, like who doesn't like flowers, or you know your name on the building that all sounds amazing.

However, with donor centric fundraising, the people who are using your organization's services are usually the last people to be brought into the conversation of what programming should look like, or what would have a more significant impact on their lives, or you know how to actually move towards systemic change.

So with community centric fundraising, it's a newer fundraising model. It's been around for, I think, like 5 years, 10 years, something like that. And it was actually founded by Vu Le, he is a thought leader in the nonprofit space who actually runs a blog called 'Nonprofit AF,' and I've been following very closely for quite a while. So when he and a bunch of other Seattle fundraisers launched community centric

fundraising as a movement, I felt so seen, and I felt so happy to have the tools and the words to express the problems that I had been seeing with philanthropy. And you know, with the way that I was building relationships with donors, and even things that donors were already thinking about, which was like, amazing to see how progressive donors were already in their journey towards equitable philanthropy.

So, yeah, CCF was an amazing thing to start learning about. It's founded on 10 principles which are available on their website. The principles, just as a quick overview,

1. fundraising must: be grounded in race, equity and social justice.
2. Individual organizational missions are not as important as a collective community.
3. Nonprofits are generous with and usually supportive of one another.
4. All who engage in strengthening the community are equally valued, whether volunteers, staff, donor, or board member.
5. Time is valued as equally as money.
6. We treat donors as partners, and this means that we are transparent and occasionally have difficult conversations.
7. We foster a sense of belonging, not othering.
8. We promote the understanding that everyone personally benefits from engaging in the work of social justice, it's not just charity and compassion.
9. We see the work of social justice as holistic and transformative, not transactional.
10. And we recognize that healing and liberation require commitment to economic justice.

So based on those 10 principles, you're able to apply community centric fundraising to a variety of different aspects of nonprofit.

So I have spent the last 2 years working on implementing community centric fundraising in a medium sized organization, around a 5 million dollar budget. And that was really interesting, because this organization actually was making a quarter of their revenue on signature events.

So, events that would have ticket prices of anywhere from \$125 to \$375, which I don't know about most of you listening to this, to me, that's a lot of money like it's something that I would just like... I grew up poor, right? That's the amount of money that I would spend on like multiple months on groceries for some of those ticket prices. So for me, moving forward with something like that, felt a little bit unethical, because I know that our service users will never be able to afford that ticket. And even if it's still donated, even if they're able to come to this fancy gala like, how are you gonna get your hair done? Your nails done? Your outfit? Like all those things are barriers to feeling comfortable, to not being 'othered.'

So something that I wanted to do was switch our entire fundraising strategy to be as inclusive as possible, to be as least harmful as possible. And what that meant was moving away from events and towards individual giving, but also having all these like amazing in-depth discussions with donors about why is it wrong to avoid paying your fair share of taxes.

You know? And why do I feel nonprofits are part of the problem? Because, we're subsidizing for government supports and also enabling people to not pay their share of taxes, but also, I need your money please give me. Please donate because short term we need to feed people, but long term like, we should still be pushing for public policy changes.

So, the difference between community centric fundraising and donor centric, is just who is being focused and who is being prioritized. So the entire community, including donors, service users, staff, volunteers, partner organizations, or just the donors.

So all those conversations become a lot easier when you're informed yourself and like, have done research on the barriers facing your community, and the barriers that nonprofit work uphold as a whole, and then just starting slow, so like seeing where the donor is at. So, the easiest way I do that is, I'll say the word white supremacy, and then I'll be like Oh, oh, what! Did you say nothing. Okay. Okay, okay. Great. So we can talk.

You know, but if they like kind of like look confused and it's kinda like, Okay, well, maybe they don't know what that means and like pull it back, like I guess you can't start with pronouns right? Systemic racism, and kind of like move it up a little bit in their learning. But yeah, I feel like just having a trigger like, yeah, white supremacy are you gonna say anything? Having a buddy, like if it's gonna get too emotionally draining for me, I can tap into my white colleague to step in and explain why racism is bad, and why we're adopting ethical fundraising practices to someone who might be saying something harmful. And also approaching the conversation, unapologetically, because donors are already thinking about this. They're already thinking about their wealth, and they're already thinking about like the issues in society. So it's just about putting those together in one conversation.

Jesse Clarke (10:20)

Hmm, yeah. I love that you have this buzzword that you use to sort of test the waters. And you know, which is a powerful concept that I think you know also, I mean part of the conversation that's happening in the International Cooperation Space too is around white saviorism, and you know, I think that's kind of an extension, you know it's an extension of various expressions of white supremacy in different contexts.

I'm wondering, cause I know you, you just mentioned it briefly now, as well, but you talked about, maybe talk about it in terms of your own perspective first of all, what happens when when you're dealt with donors who have, who are racist, who have, you know, attitudes towards the people you're working with, that are, you know, really inappropriate or don't recognize the systemic barriers and then also, you know, for allies who want to support people who are in that position. What are some suggestions of what they can do as well?

Maria Rio (11:20)

Yeah, so you have a few different choices when you're approached by a donor who is being harmful. Right. So the first thing that I do is, are they being purposely harmful, or are they just kinda like ignorant to why, what they're saying is harmful? And I have so much grace for people who just don't know, cause again, like we all have very different lived experiences. I can't expect them to, you know, assume that what they're saying, to know that what they're saying is like, really, not okay.

So, for example, if someone asked me "what was it like living in a refugee shelter?" It's like, "okay, well, that's like, private and a really intense question to ask me." Cause like. Of course, it was terribly traumatic.

So if they are being unintentionally harmful, I try to educate them as much as possible, and you don't have to learn it in that conversation like it might be like, here's you know, this education about pronouns. Here's a website where you can learn more. And then, like, bring it up and reinforce the next time that you talk to them right.

If they're being purposely problematic, I'm a really big fan of just ending the relationship, because you're getting something out of our partnership as well, you're getting to put my logo on your company and say you're a good person, feel like you're a good person. And I'm not willing to do that if you're saying something that's obviously terrible. So I've actually really empowered fundraisers to end relationships like that.

We had an organization a corporation who approached us to do kind of urban agriculture in their front yard, and that was the one that they were saying like, well, we don't want people that come here to have you know mental health issues. God forbid, you know. So at that time, like, we took the time to educate the donor, and they still weren't getting it. They weren't trying to grasp it. It was all about getting defensive. And if it's causing more harm than good, maybe you could spend your time with someone who is, understanding what you're doing and why it matters and why it's not okay to talk about your service users that way.

Jesse Clarke (13:36)

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think those are issues that you can run into in the International corporation sector, too, in terms of how you know, donors might see the people that you're supporting or who you're working with you know, I think there's so much potential there for you know I think both for stereotypes and misconceptions, but also that again, there's also an opportunity, right for you to challenge those and to really push people to really interrogate their relationships you know with, colonial structures with whatever global development means you know, these days, and I think you know. And again, with a lot of systemic structures that really maintain some of these inequalities.

Just to circle back a little bit more on to the community centric fundraising as well, which is, you know, those two themes are really closely related. I imagine, for me, like when I'm hearing you talk about it has the potential to really create some exciting innovations, setting new kinds of practices and partnerships as well, and transform in that really, you know, positive sense. Maybe there's some examples of that you could share with us as well today.

Maria Rio (14:49)

Yes, so I definitely have a few. But my favorite one is something that was so innovative. I was so proud of us doing it. I was so happy with how it turned out.

So basically, what we did is we said, hey, we're gonna survey our service users and get their top public policy priorities. So we surveyed over 200 service users, gave them 20 things to pick from that we thought might be relevant. What do you think? And then they got to choose their top 3. So their top 3 was affordable housing, increase social assistance rates, and free or government covered dental care. So, great now that we have these 3 priorities, what can we do with them?

So we, we're not a policy forward organization. We didn't have like a policy person. So what can we do with this information? So something that we decided to do was create like a community fund where we would get 2 donors to give us \$25,000, and one of the \$25,000 would go to us, and the other would go to an organization chosen by our community members that addresses one of those top public policy priorities. So, we pitched it to a few different donors, and I think, like less than a handful, and we had two say yes,

Jesse Clarke (16:13)

Amazing yeah.

Maria Rio (16:14)

so we're so excited. And \$25,000, we picked organizations with less than a 1 million dollar budget. That's a huge amount to just drop in your lap. So this and then to the Neighborhood Plan Trust, and what they do is they buy buildings to maintain them, so they're accessible and affordable to community members for years to come. And like kind of fight, gentrification and high rises, and development. And that ended up turning into a really amazing partnership with the Neighborhood Land Trust.

They came and spoke to our community members, thank you so much for choosing us, here's what we're doing in the next few years. Here's why, like affordable housing policies have been stagnant, and what we're doing about it. And they also actually partnered up with an organizations to write municipal letters to say hey, you need to be working on this. So to do a campaign together towards this public policy initiative.

Jesse Clarke (17:18)

I love that. That's that's incredible.

Maria Rio (17:19)

It was just about sharing resources and prioritizing the community versus the individual organization, and doing what the community was looking to do, like public policy that would help with affordable housing, would have the biggest impact.

So getting their input, listening to them, letting them be the final decision makers, like the donor didn't have a final say of like where this \$25,000 went to. They give it to us, and then we give it to neighborhood land trust. It was amazing.