

Here is the full text of development strategist Kara Logan Berlin's talk titled "How to be a better fundraiser" at TEDxSantaClaraUniversity conference.

Kara Logan Berlin - TEDx Talk TRANSCRIPT

I'm here today to talk about fundraising, or as you probably think of it, "the other F-word."

Because if you want to change the world, you have to know how to pay for it. I'm not talking about being a good person — you can do that for free. I'm talking about if you want to create something, start something, galvanize a community, improve the lives of others, run for office.

Every day, great ideas die on the vine, because they don't have capital to get off the ground. And all of the work, the thought, the vision that goes into the idea, isn't worth much if you can't pay your bills.

And while most of the greatest social movements in history were powered purely by an idea and people's belief in that idea, real change and impact require resources.

Real people do this work, they need real change, real impact and resources to actually make it happen. The people that believe in this work have to have the support and the resources to do it. That's where I come in. I get essential resources into the hands of people and visionaries on the front lines, doing work that matters.

We spend the majority of our waking hours working. We spend more time working than we do with our loved ones. So I decided early on that I have to love my work, and it has to add value.

And while I would love to be one of these people who spearheads social change from the ground up, the thing I realized early on in my non-profit

career is that the thing I'm good at, the thing I'm really good at, is raising money. And I love it. I think it is a privilege to work alongside bold, ambitious, optimistic leaders and the organizations they serve.

So I teach people how to do the thing I'm good at, because the more people that learn how to be good at my end of this work, the more work will get done.

And I teach everyone. I teach CEOs and presidents, and boards of directors and EDs. I teach development directors in all sorts of teams and non-profit newbies, social change agents and candidates. I teach anyone that wants to do something extraordinary how to fund their dream.

My dream is that there will be more people like me doing this work well and that development will be an undergraduate course at universities, so that fundraising animals like me will find this job out of the gate, instead of discovering it years later, accidentally.

I even have the curriculum developed, but short of overhauling undergraduate course requirements, I think tonight's probably a good first step to get people to think about fundraising more as an opportunity and less as a dirty word.

If you want to change the world, you have to know how to pay for it. To do that well, you have to understand three big things. Your feelings about wealth and money, the importance of building relationships, and how to ask for what you want.

Let's start at the top, your feelings about wealth and money. What is your relationship to money? Money is complicated, it makes everyone squeamish, it makes everyone act kind of weird. Anyone who's ever had to split the check after dinner with friends can tell you this. Imagine what it was like before Venmo.

To help people learn how to raise money, you have to help them understand their deal with money, because everybody has baggage. Grew up poor? Baggage. Grew up rich? Baggage. Mad or envious that other people have more money than you? Baggage.

Think people with money are smarter than you? Baggage. Feel guilty that you have more money than other people? That's some first-class baggage.

It's still baggage, people, it's still baggage.

So whatever your deal is with your baggage, you have to reconcile it if you're going to be able to ask for money. And here's a little tip about asking people for money. The only difference about really wealthy people and us is that they have more money than us. That's it. Don't overcomplicate it. They come with their own baggage.

When you think about how to do this work, it's important to remember that money makes the world go round. You hear that all the time, but it's true. Whether you're a non-profit, for-profit, or you pay your own bills. We often feel like talking about it is this icky, embarrassing, ugly thing, but it's just money. And it's a fact of life.

So how you feel about it directly affects how you approach it. Like everyone else when I started out in this work, I had to examine and understand my own feelings about wealth and money. And I had to learn how to separate them from how I feel about raising money for important causes.

How I feel about asking for money to help people do good work in the world is not the same as how I feel about asking for money for myself. This is an important distinction.

When I go and talk to someone, I'm not asking them to pay my mortgage. I'm giving them an opportunity to invest in an idea that's going to change

the world for the better.

Why should I feel bad about that? The answer is that I shouldn't. I wouldn't feel bad about giving them the inside tip on a hot stock. And I am not going to feel bad about giving them the inside tip on empowering social change either.

If you want to be good at raising money, you have to be able to reframe the ask, both for yourself and for other people, as an opportunity.

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Next, you have to get prepared to build some relationships. People give to people, they don't just give to ideas. And if they don't believe in the person running the place, you're already dead in the water. This is true whether you're in stocks or venture capital, politics or nonprofits.

Building a relationship with people takes work. You have to care about more than just what you want or need, you have to also value what someone else wants or needs. I know, it's a shocking, terrible idea.

But oftentimes, closing gifts is understanding the person, more than it's important to know the product. And if you think building a relationship with people takes work, building a relationship with someone you're asking for money from takes work, and it takes homework.

Have you done any research? Do you have any idea what they care about? Do you know why they should invest in your work? Can you answer that question in less than 30 seconds? If you can't, the meeting is going to be pretty rough. And the answer can't be "Because they're super rich and they live in your zip code."

When you talk to people and understand what they care about, it has to be

in person. Fundraising is relational, it's not transactional. And you have to ask them questions.

When I sit down with a donor, it goes something like this. "Hi, thanks so much for seeing me. How have you been? Did you guys go anywhere fun over holiday? Nice, I love Mexico. Do you always go to the same place? Oh, that's awesome! Are those your kids? They're so cute. How old are they? Where are they in school? Oh, that's a great school, are you guys very involved there? Your spouse in on the board? How's that? How did you guys meet? Oh, at Santa Clara, that's awesome. Are you super involved in the alumni network? So interesting. Where do you guys live, again? That's great. Is that your boat?"

I literally go through all of these things, right. And you know why? Because guess what I know now. I know they're out of 120 grand a year in schooling for the next 12 years. Right? Spouse is on the board of the kids' school, I know they're out of 100K probably. It's a six-figure. They're both involved in their school alumni, that's probably 25K. They told me they live on the Upper East Side — I can look up their apartment online and find out what their mortgage is. And I know they own a second home in Mexico. Oh, and they own a boat. Which is like funny money, right?

So what I now understand — It's true. What I now understand is that their 1,000-dollar gift is probably more of a starter gift. And I should be thinking about ways to help them partner with us and invest in a more meaningful way.

I know this sounds a tad mercenary. I'm not confused about how it sounds.

But here's what I want to tell you, because this is the part that all my clients always want to skip, because they think it's the fluff and it's not important. If you don't understand what they care about and what they value, how are you ever going to be able to tell them about your work,

right? I want them to fund our work, I do. But I also want them to have a really meaningful experience as a donor, so that they feel like we're partners and they're not an ATM, right?

So it's important to ask the questions, because the more you know about them and you know what they value, the more you can steer the conversation in a direction about your work that will resonate for them.

And once you get past the get-to-know-you part, you get into the fun stuff, like, "Why are you philanthropic at all?" Right? "Why do you invest in new ideas? Do you want giving back to be a value you pass on to your children? Can we help you do that?"

It's really awesome, it's meaningful, and remember, it's a conversation, it's not a cross examination, it's not an interview. Don't walk in there and tell them everything you already know about them, because you did your research. You don't get extra points for knowing how to use Google. It's 75% them talking, 25% you listening. It's better to be a good listener than a good showman.

And once you understand what they care about, you can talk to them about what you care about. You can tell them about you.

Now, when you do this, don't get too deep into the weeds, or you'll lose them. It's a lot like when I sit down with guys in finance, right, and I say, you know, "How's work?" I'm looking for, like, a thumbs up, thumbs down. But what I get sometimes is a long description of how the markets are trending, and my brain leaves my body and starts to think about what time my dry cleaner closes.

Like, I don't have capacity for that. And they don't have capacity for that level detail of our work. If they want it, they'll ask you the questions.

It's this thing that happens over and over, because — here's an example. I

worked with this CEO once, and I was hired to teach him how to talk to human people, like a human person. It was a very difficult job.

So, he kept getting great donor meetings, and he wasn't closing any gifts. And I could not figure out what the problem was, so finally, I was like, "I'm going to come with you." *It's going to be great.*

So I went with him to meetings, and what would happen was, he was getting into such detail with the donors that their eyes were glazing over, and then after he was done with his 15-minute pitch, they literally would say — this happened, like, three times in a row — "*God, that sounds great. Congratulations. Keep up the good work.*" And that was the meeting, which was obviously not the outcome we were looking for.

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So, he couldn't understand what I was trying to say to him, that I finally, in an act of sheer desperation, was like ... "You know what I love? I love NASA. I love NASA. I think it is unbelievably amazing we have figured out how to get a person to the Moon. I think it's awesome. I think the idea of getting someone to the Moon, and they walk on the Moon, and I love rocket ships. I love rocket ships, rocket ships are amazing. But if you start to tell me about the rocket ship, and how it gets to the Moon, and the math and the science equations, on how the rocket ship gets to the Moon, I promise you, I will hang myself with my own hair."

I was like, "That is not how you tell people about your work. What is the need?" Like, what's the point, right? How do you address the need, why are you better at it than anybody else? And what can you do to make it about them? How can they help you get to the Moon? That's the good stuff. If you're able to do that, you're probably ready to make the ask.

Now, I don't expect everyone to be super excited to ask people for money.

That's why development is an actual profession and not an awkward hobby.

Naturally great fundraisers love people, they can and will talk to anyone, they can find common ground with anyone, they're your friends that talk to people in the elevator or at the grocery store. They believe in the work required to both build relationships and keep them. And they naturally have a high tolerance for rejection.

But I don't expect everyone to be a natural, and you don't have to be a natural to raise money. You just have to respect the people and the process, and do the work.

Will you reconcile your baggage? Will you commit to build relationships? If you will, you're ready to make the ask.

And the ask is oftentimes as simple as using the phrase "Would you consider?" Would you consider becoming a monthly donor? Would you consider increasing your support to 100 dollars? Would you consider investing in our work at the one-million-dollar level?

"Would you consider" does a couple of awesome things. One, it gives the donor an easy way out. Like, they can say "no" without it being "yes-no." And two, it gives you a second ask. "Well, what would you consider?" It's good, right?

When you do this, remember, you're not asking for yourself. You're asking on behalf of all of the people you serve or are touched by your genius. This isn't a personal favor, right? Feel proud of the ask — it's incredible that you do this work. Don't try to be someone you're not, you're going to go to these meetings and think you need to big-shot it. Be yourself, authenticity matters, nobody likes a phony. Just be yourself.

And please, please don't torpedo your own ask. What I mean by this is

don't walk into the meeting and say — I had an ED that did this all the time, I stopped inviting him. He'd say, "We're not here today to ask you for money." Yes, we are!

That's exactly, literally, why we're here today. Don't do that. Don't say, "Whatever you can do to help." That is hands down the fastest way to get the smallest possible gift someone thinks they can give you and get away with. Not kidding.

And don't take it back. Once you've made the ask — "Would you consider supporting us at the 10,000-dollar level? Or the five? Or the two? Or one? You know what? Take the year off. You're the best, thanks!" Don't do that! Ask the question, wait till 10, count to 10 before you speak again, keep your face like this.

They are grown-ups. They have all the power in this situation. They can answer the question. Don't take it back.

Which brings me to my favorite. Don't ask, don't get. If you don't make an actual ask, no one will give you actual money. And if no one gives you actual money, you actually can't do anything with it. It's very simple — don't ask, don't get.

Listen, I would love to live in a world where we didn't have to ask people for money to do important work that will change people's lives. I would love to not have to teach people how to make a case for the importance of feeding and housing and educating people.

But this is the world that we live in, and if we're committed to doing this work, and doing it well, we have to be as committed to the art of funding this work as we are to the art of executing it.

I'm going to repeat that, because I think it's really important. We have to be as committed to the art of funding our work as we are to the art of



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executing it. And at its core, the art of funding the work means that we have to truly believe that the purpose and the privilege of our work is to provide people with an extraordinary way to use their wealth that will change people's lives. It's an opportunity, because at its core, that's what it is. And how great is that?

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