

Philanthropists - The Ultimate Problem Solvers

My studies at The Pennsylvania State University have been a fountain of knowledge, full of eye opening experiences in the field of fundraising and philanthropy. I continue to meditate on a question/idea that was proposed to me as *the first question one should always ask when attempting to approach any new campaign or organization*: What is the problem? It is not until we identify the problem, that we will be able to attempt to fix it. A recent problem I chose to explore was one that hits close to home for me because of my experience as a young person who struggled with reading in elementary school. In second grade, I had a high reading anxiety which stunted my learning. If it wasn't for Ms. Medley and the poetry of Shel Silverstein, I very likely could have been left behind. However, with patience and creative, intriguing material I was able to catch up to the expected reading level which the rest of my peers were at. When young people get behind on a basic skill like reading, they become embarrassed, which makes them want to stop trying. Low literacy rates are an important social issue and ongoing problem passed on from generation to generation. According to ProLiteracy.org “Children of parents with low literacy skills have a 72 percent chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves. These children are more likely to get poor grades, display behavioral problems, have high absentee rates, repeat school years, or drop out.” (proliteracy.org, Adult Literacy Facts). I found my problem. Time to decide how I want to address it.

I have decided to create a campaign which utilizes live theatre to teach children of different ages how to read, promoting higher literacy rates in cities throughout the country. My hope is that through working with a group of their peers on a small performance, that these youth will let down their walls, feel comfortable and have enough fun that they won't realize that they are actually excelling in an area in which they are self conscious. Through the rehearsal process of analyzing, memorizing and performing a script, students will raise their reading level while experiencing the process of live theatre

with their peers. This will take the pressure off and allow them to have fun while they learn to read. My goal is to convince regional theaters around the country to join the campaign by becoming financial supporters and running their own local campaign from their theatre.

Marcus Buckingham's book, *StandOut* enabled me to be self aware and have to confidence to approach a project of this size. As someone who has always been a creative thinker I sometimes underestimate the worth of my ideas falling into the trap of "it's all been done" or the idea that my idea is not unique enough. The StandOut assessment was an encouraging reminder of my specific strengths and the importance of utilizing those strengths. The more I learn about fundraising leadership the more I realize that my personal experience with live theatre is a huge asset and can be used in many ways other than simply being a commercial product.

My courses at Penn State also has opened my eyes to a world of visual communication. As author and fundraising leader, Seth Godin often mentions, it is all storytelling. As a director and visual artist I am constantly having conversations about what story we are trying to tell and how we will tell it. We always talk about how audiences learn much more from what they see than what they hear. Pictographs, videos and power point presentations rely heavily on this concept. Communicating clearly with photos, graphs, pictures and charts while being selective when it comes to the amount of text used in a presentation is a underestimated skill. When communicating to a panel or the public that specific and concise is key when attempting to get a point across clearly without overwhelming or boring those you are talking to.

"Research shows that an organization's culture dramatically affects its effectiveness. Culture is pervasive, affecting all areas of the organization, including fund development." (Simone Joyaux, *Building a Culture of Philanthropy in Your Organization*). This quote from Joyaux's online "Nonprofit Quarterly" article was a huge lesson to me this semester and lived in my subconscious as I continued to work. This concept of culture has

opened my eyes to the long run in every project I approach or organization I might work for. It is no longer about small victories and quick fixes but is, instead, about a slow build of consistency and communication which allows every individual in the organization to be on the same page and work toward the same goal. This is vital when building a new campaign and trying to find an organization which this campaign would best fit.

In the Network for Good's *14 Reasons Why People Donate*, each reason is extremely personal. The reasons why people give in this article can be expanded to an even broader concept of the reason anyone does anything. It is always personal. Whether it is donating money, time, energy or connections, people are constantly looking to change someone's life or feel they have some power to help someone whose story moved them emotionally. A big theme in philanthropy which is one of the main themes in theatre is community. People want to feel involved and connected. This concept was a huge factor in my approach to pitching my campaign idea to regional theaters.

Every part of fundraising and philanthropy impacts the other. The majority of non-profit theatre organizations across the country have massively important education departments. The development and execution of the activities in this one department are equally as informative of who the non-profit is claiming to be, as the shows they choose to produce in their season. It is my belief that live theatre can be used as a tool to help with the education of students who are struggling and not reacting to traditional teaching practices.

Work Cited

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