

## Jason's Blog

*It's Never About The Money*

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15 Aug 10 [Is A Culture of Philanthropy Really The Goal?](#)

A common aim – usually unwritten – of advancement professionals is to “create a culture of philanthropy” within their institutions. The typical reason for this goal stems from a sense that board members and others with high giving capacity are not responding to the institution with a matching degree of generosity. I usually hear a complaint like this: “Giving is not, and has really never been, at the level that it needs to be!”

I remain unconvinced, though, that creating a thriving “culture of philanthropy,” is the answer. First, philanthropy is defined as goodwill toward or love of fellow man. I’m unsure as to how, exactly, an institution can take folks who are not exceptionally “philanthropic” (i.e., lovers of human beings) and become the impetus for the kind of transformation it would take to make them so.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, when I hear advancement professionals talk of creating a “culture of philanthropy,” my sense is that they aren’t attempting to create an environment that supports people who are extraordinary lovers of human beings per se. Rather, they are wishing to create an environment in which fundraising efforts are supported and donors regularly give to their capacity!

So, perhaps our language is a bit misguided. Instead of seeking a culture of philanthropy, we may be really seeking a **Culture of Engagement**. Simply put, the more engaged people (e.g., donors, employees, board members) become with our institutions, the more they give to their potential. And, to my mind, the better culture to create is one that encourages engagement.

The 10 hallmarks of an institution with a **Culture of Engagement** are:

1. The mission of the institution is compelling and unique and is regularly integrated into institutional events, speeches, and other activities
2. Employees are passionate and exemplify extraordinary commitment to the institution
3. Board members use the pronoun “we” and “us” instead of “you” or “they”
4. Donors have relationships with multiple employees and administrators
5. The input from donors is valued as much as their money – there are formal and informal ways in which the institution regularly asks donors, “We’d like your advice on. . .”
6. Advancement officers are evaluated not only on dollars committed by donors, but also on *activity* that leads to increased donor engagement
7. The advancement budget is seen as an investment – as opposed to an expense – by the leaders of the institution
8. Donor stewardship efforts – saying “thank you” publicly – are regularly integrated with all institutional activities and events
9. Each employee sees herself as an “advancement officer,” and encourages others to join in the work of the institution
10. Board members recognize the need to attract more people of influence, affluence, and generosity to the Board and regularly introduce new Board member prospects to the CEO/president.

A **Culture of Engagement** is open to the ideas and perspectives of others. It supports inviting others to participate in and help define the institution’s future. It says, “we want your input because we value your experiences and perspectives.” And when your institution regularly and consistently expresses that culture, people, employees and donors included, respond to their highest capacity.

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