



# Beginning at the Beginning

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## THE CONTEXT FOR EVERYTHING ELSE

*The capacity to learn is a gift; the ability to learn is a skill; the willingness to learn is a choice.*

—BRIAN HERBERT AND KEVIN J. ANDERSON,  
*DUNE: HOUSE HARKONNEN*

■ **DEAR READER** As the title promises, this book focuses on increasing donor loyalty by nurturing relationships and using communications to help nurture those relationships.

But—and it's a big but—something else comes first: the context for this work. For Tom and me, this context is the heart and soul of the book. We believe this context is critical, and that's where we begin.

Simone ■

## WHY THE LARGER CONTEXT MATTERS

I'm one of the forest-and-trees people. I embrace the big picture as well as the smaller items inside the picture. I believe in keeping both in my mind at one time, despite the occasional difficulty! As both business theory and self-help guides proclaim, it's important to have a vision to know where you are going. That's the forest picture. With that big picture in mind, it's easier to understand why and how the trees—the smaller items—fit inside.

For me, everything is linked. That's systems thinking. Ignoring one part of the system doesn't work. It's like a prospective client who wants me to help raise more money but doesn't want me to talk about mission and values, governance, and

management. I explain it's like a house, one system. You've asked me to fix the plumbing, but you won't let me fix the heating system that causes the plumbing to freeze. I can fix the plumbing but it will freeze and break again. We have to fix the heating system, too.

Just about every problem I've ever encountered in fund development arises because the organization or the staff (including the fundraiser) doesn't understand the larger context. It's like wearing blinders. For many fundraisers, no one talks with them enough about the larger context. For others, they're focused on the trees and don't respect the forest. Still others suspect there's a forest and want to understand it, but are stymied by unsupportive leadership.

I'm not alone in this perception. Fund development colleagues around the world tell me that the larger context is critical but isn't talked about enough. Well, this book talks about that, just like I do always.

*I suspect we all need a larger context; otherwise, complacency sets in. We stay in our comfort zone. Perhaps the larger context can serve as a touchstone—or a lens or frame—to help us venture where we are less comfortable; to challenge us.*

For me, the larger context includes two elements: (1) a philosophical framework for philanthropy and (2) effective organizations that create an environment conducive to effective fund development. I believe these two elements position organizations to develop better fund development programs.

Relationship building (which includes communications) is embedded within this larger context. In my experience, the ability to move back and forth through the layers of context—or preferably integrate them fully and seamlessly—affect all the work that nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) do.

## PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

I begin with the first element of the larger context: the philosophical framework.

I think that most professionals ask themselves this question: Why do I choose to do “this work”? I imagine that a doctor asks that question, so does a teacher, so does any professional. And each of them answers the question personally.

I imagine those working in the nonprofit/NGO sector answer that question by saying “I believe in the mission.” For example, someone working in an environmental organization might say, “I do this work in order to make sure we have clean air to breathe.” Or maybe “I’m fighting to reduce carbon emissions so we can reduce global warming and protect the planet and its species.”

But I think there is another question that those of us who focus on the nonprofit/NGO sector must ask and answer: Why do I choose to work *in this sector*?

I think this sector demands leaders who are committed to more than their organization's particular mission. I believe this sector requires a broader commitment, to philanthropy and civil society. I call that a philosophical framework.

Who are these leaders with this broader commitment? I'm referring to fundraisers and executive directors at least, and hopefully many others in the organization. And in my experience, it's often the fundraisers who have to lead the executive directors to this understanding.

Here's my philosophical frame, part of the heart and soul of this book about relationships and communications.

### **This I Believe**

This is my really big picture.

I believe in "the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family," because this is the "foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world," as it says in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And nonprofits the world over fight for these rights.

I believe in the European Constitution, described as

the first [governmental] document of its kind to expand the human franchise to the level of global consciousness, with rights and responsibilities that encompass the totality of human existence on Earth. . . . The language throughout the text is one of universalism, making it clear that its focus is not a people, or a territory, or a nation, but rather the human race and the planet we inhabit. If we were to sum up the gist of the document, it would be a commitment to respect human diversity, promote inclusivity, champion human rights and the rights of nature, foster quality of life, pursue sustainable development, free the human spirit for deep play, build a perpetual peace, and nurture a global consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

And NGOs around the globe struggle to make these changes.

*We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community. . . . Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.*

— CÉSAR CHAVEZ, 1927 – 1993, Co-FOUNDER, UNITED FARM WORKERS

I hope that, together, we can build these communities. I believe that, together, we must try. And the nonprofit/NGO sector is critical to this community-building process.

### **Building Community**

John Gardner's 1991 monograph, "On Building Community," remains one of my favorite writings.<sup>2</sup> Gardner understands community as place and as belonging.

“Where community exists it confers upon its members identity, a sense of belonging, a measure of security.” He recognizes communities of all types: workplace, school, religious organization, club, trade union, town, neighborhood, and so forth.

He talks about the importance of community: “Families and communities are the ground-level generators and preservers of values and ethical systems . . . the ideals of justice and compassion are nurtured in communities.”

He reminds us that the word “community” itself “implies *some* degree of wholeness.” The opposite, fragmentation, stops us from thinking or acting as a community. Gardner describes the breakdown of community and some of the causes.

A decade later, using the metaphor of “bowling alone” (where previously people bowled in teams), Robert Putnam echoes similar causes that erode social connectedness and community involvement: pressures of time and money, mobility and sprawl, technology and mass media, breakdown of the old-time traditional family unit, and generational, gender, and ethnic issues. All this contributes to “isolation, alienation, estrangement,” which means there is “no longer a web of reciprocal dependencies.”<sup>3</sup>

*Philanthropy is uniquely able to build strong communities and improve people's lives.*

Yet there's hope. Despite the collapse of community, renewal happens, too. Ingredients critical for building any kind of community include shared values, diversity, effective communications, broad participation, and systems to reinforce connections, among other things.

While Gardner's writing is still applicable, other language is more common today. For example, a community's ability to regenerate itself is often called “civic capacity.” Gardner's “web of reciprocal dependencies” is today's “social capital.” And “civil society” refers to all the organizations that, together with government, help build strong communities.

Here's an overview of building community, using today's vocabulary. Think about this as a philosophical framework for philanthropy.

**Civic Engagement** That's me and you, our neighbors and friends involved in our communities, whether it's our town or some other group we belong to. The word “civic” refers to the obligations each of us have by belonging to a community.

Civic engagement means people vote and volunteer. They participate in politics and advocate on behalf of others. They band together to build a stronger community.

Of course, the degree of civic engagement goes up and down in any community or society at large. For years the United States has had one of the lowest

records of voter turnout in any voting nation. That's an example of bad civic engagement. Around the world, growing numbers of people volunteer; that's good civic engagement.

The nonprofit/NGO sector plays a critical role in civic engagement. People get together to form nonprofits to help others. NGOs bring people together for public discourse. And NGOs recruit people to volunteer their time and money to support important causes. All of this is civic engagement, a virtuous circle that happens when positive results continuously reinforce positive results.

**Social Capital** Social capital is the theory that a person's networks have value. Made popular by Robert Putnam, the term "social capital" refers to the people we know (networks) and what we do for each other (reciprocity).

You use social capital everyday. You meet with some of your work colleagues to solve a problem. You borrow your friend's car because yours is in the garage. You attend an event to meet corporate executives, recognizing that this expanded network might help your nonprofit in the future. Social capital makes individuals and organizations more productive.

Each of us has personal and public networks based on reciprocity, which produce mutually beneficial results. Social capital identifies two kinds of reciprocity. One is the exchange of favors: "You do this for me and then I'll do this for you." This form of reciprocity always worries me because it smacks of some form of "payoff."

The second kind of reciprocity is more like philanthropy, a general commitment to help others. "I'll do this without expecting anything specific in return—because someday when I need it, maybe someone will help me." For example, you donate money to the hospital because someday you expect to use its services. I volunteer at the homeless shelter because I imagine how easy it would be to lose my job and default on my mortgage.

This kind of reciprocity recognizes mutual dependence and shared accountability for healthy communities. All this connecting reminds me of the "webs of interconnectedness," from Peter Senge, learning organization guru.

Here's how social capital works, inspired by Putnam's descriptions in *Bowling Alone*.<sup>4</sup>

- *Social capital helps people work together to solve problems they all share.* A lack of social capital would mean that most of us just sat back and waited till others (perhaps too few) tried to solve the problem. I think of climate change and its effect on the planet. Regulations like car emission standards can make things better; that's social capital. But we need a norm at the citizen level. Imagine a day when the peer pressure would be so great that no one would buy a gas-guzzling Hummer. And then our social capital would require that General Motors stop making them. I'll bet a nonprofit is working on this right now.

- *The goodwill generated through social capital helps the community work smoothly.* We buy things at stores assuming that the cashier isn't cheating us. I get into a taxi expecting the driver to take me to my destination, not a different one. Your donors assume you're using their gifts as directed. To behave otherwise would produce dysfunction in daily lives.
- *Social capital helps us lead happier and more productive lives.* Trusting connections and deep bonds actually help us "develop or maintain character traits that are good for the rest of society." Both experience and research show that social ties reduce isolation and stress, provide feedback to mitigate negative impulses, and help people develop empathy. Research even verifies the health effects of volunteering and giving money.
- *Social capital also helps us learn and change.* Through our networks, we meet diverse people and connect with different life experiences. We pass information around, often increasing its usefulness through our conversations. That same information exchange helps individuals, organizations, and communities achieve their goals. Effective nonprofits join this information exchange to support their own progress.

*There was this joke that when the women who worked in the lab were stressed, they came in, cleaned the lab, had coffee, and bonded.... When the men were stressed, they holed up somewhere on their own.... The "tend and befriend" notion developed by Drs. Klein and Taylor may explain why women consistently outlive men. Study after study has found that social ties reduce our risk of disease by lowering blood pressure, heart rate, and cholesterol. "There's no doubt," says Dr. Klein, "that friends are helping us live."<sup>5</sup>*

Not only do you use social capital yourself, you watch its use daily. From religious congregations to school boards, sports leagues to civic groups, Internet networks to professional associations and your own favorite nonprofits—all this is social capital in action, carried out through all those civil society organizations. Social capital produces civil society.

**Civil Society** "Civil society" refers to all the things people and organizations do together, without being forced to do so. The term itself is very old, and commonly used everywhere in the world except the United States.<sup>6</sup> Just visit the International Fundraising Congress, hosted annually in The Netherlands by the Resource Alliance ([www.resource-alliance.org](http://www.resource-alliance.org)). You'll hear "civil society" all the time.

I think it's easiest to understand the term "civil society" as those organizations and individuals that come together voluntarily to build stronger communities. Or, as Alexis de Tocqueville said, "proposing a common object for the exertions of a great many men [and women] and inducing them voluntarily to pursue it."<sup>7</sup>

Most important, these people come together outside the boundaries of government. The “outside of government” piece is critical. Government doesn’t make us get together to build the hospital or found a museum. Government doesn’t form trade unions or professional associations. In fact, many civil society organizations fight government, for example, the struggle for civil rights and the right to vote.

For some, civil society includes the broadest array of collective action: every kind of nonprofit/NGO including charities, religious institutions, professional associations, trade unions, civic groups, academia, the arts, businesses, the media, and more. Others define a more limited view of civil society, focusing primarily on the nonprofit/NGO sector.

But no matter what you include or exclude, civil society helps build stronger communities. And many of us believe that it’s the spread of civil society worldwide that produces the most significant change.

*Peace and prosperity cannot be achieved without partnerships involving Governments, international organizations, the business community, and civil society.*

—UNITED NATIONS, [WWW.UNORG/ISSUES/CIVILSOCIETY](http://WWW.UNORG/ISSUES/CIVILSOCIETY)

**Civic Capacity** Without civic engagement, there is no civic capacity. And without the sector called “civil society,” there is reduced civic capacity.

Civic capacity is the ability of a community to identify its challenges and opportunities, overcome the problems, and capitalize on the opportunities. Inherent in the concept is the coming together of diverse community voices, not just the select few who traditionally wield privilege and power.

The term “civic capacity” most typically relates a town or city and the duties and obligations belonging to that community. The nonprofit/NGO sector has modified the term to “organizational capacity,” referencing the capacity of an organization to identify and solve its challenges and identify and capitalize on its opportunities—in other words, achieve its mission.

Civic capacity depends on social capital and civic engagement. It depends on a strong civil society to partner with or fight against government.

### **Building Community Redux**

In sum, building community relies on the ability of individuals and groups to connect, to build bridges, to nurture relationships, and to work together for change. Healthy communities depend on civic capacity. Civic capacity is built through social capital (which helps increase civic engagement), civil society, and government (which are not discussed in this book). All this together produces a virtuous circle to build community.

Yet we've all encountered the exact opposite: insular people and organizations. For example, I know fundraisers who pay little attention to what's happening in the field. I've watched nonprofits with similar missions ignore cooperative opportunities.

Insular people and organizations focus only on their own interests and issues, disregarding anything beyond self-imposed boundaries. Those who are insular ignore new ideas or different experiences. Their inward, narrow-minded approach limits their own possibility for success and distances them from connections that could generate meaningful relationships and build healthy communities.

*Individuals acquire a sense of self from their continuous relationships to others, and from the culture of their native place. . . . Humans need communities—and a sense of community. . . . An understanding of the mutual dependence of individual and group has existed below the level of consciousness in all healthy communities from the beginnings of time.*

—JOHN GARDNER, "ON BUILDING COMMUNITY"

## EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Here's my mantra: Effective organizations are more likely to produce effective fund development. To reiterate my earlier metaphor about systems thinking: Your organization is the house. Fund development is the plumbing. The whole house has to work, not just the plumbing.

### Key Components of Effective Organizations

Chapter 3 describes, in detail, five components that help make organizations effective and then directly impact fund development. They are:

1. Organizational development specialists
2. Culture of philanthropy
3. Value of research
4. Qualified opinions
5. Commitment to conversation and questions, learning and change

There are more, but I picked these five because they are of particular value to fund development. Also, they're central to fund development, the most effective organizations recognize the value of relationships. And I'm talking about relationships beyond donors.

In Chapter 4 I describe four types of relationships. I do *not* intend to discuss all these relationships, although I believe that the first three are essential to all



organizations. The fourth is optional, but you'll see my bias soon enough! The general concepts of relationship building and communications in this book apply to any of these relationships:

1. **Philanthropic relationships.** How your organization relates to its donors of time and money. That is the focus of the book, discussed in detail in subsequent chapters.
2. **Relationships with other organizations.** How your organization relates to other organizations and to government. All organizations must build relationships with other organizations in order to fulfill the promise of building community and civic capacity and to be more effective. This relationship is referenced periodically in the book.
3. **Relationships within your organization.** How the various internal parts of your organization relate in order to create an effective organization. This relationship, which is required by all organizations to ensure effectiveness, is discussed briefly in this book.
4. **Advocacy and public policy relationships.** How your organization promotes public policy that fosters healthy communities. Some of us believe that ensuring democracy and freedom is the ultimate role of the nonprofit/NGO sector. This topic is discussed briefly in this book.

## EFFECTIVE FUND DEVELOPMENT

The sad truth is, you *can* raise money without an effective organization. You *can* raise money without embracing my key components of effective organizations.

Many successful fundraisers ignore the larger context that Tom and I describe in this book. But our experience shows you can raise more money more easily by embracing this larger context. And we're convinced you won't be so frustrated if you expand your view beyond the trees to the forest—and accept the power and responsibility you have for the forest.

Everyone looks to the development staff to make fund development effective. But too often, people ignore how organizational effectiveness impacts fund development.

Fundraisers are the most powerful voice to point out why and how organizational effectiveness affects fund development effectiveness. As a fundraiser, your power comes from this one truth: You work in the fund development office; therefore, you control money.

Here's my theory: Everyone else in the organization fantasizes that you print money in the basement. Even though they realize that's merely a fantasy, they count on you to raise money. That gives you the right, the power, and the responsibility to explain what compromises—or helps—the raising of money.

## IN CONCLUSION

Philanthropy is in a unique position to build both civil society and civic capacity. But not, I think, without this larger context. A philosophical framework coupled with an effective organization produces the best fund development program.

For me, these remarks from Paul Pribbenow, CFRE capture the larger context: “Simply put, a focus on bold ideals often leaves us with vacuous principles untethered to the reality of our daily work, while a focus on the cold technique and ‘dull’ work of fundraising leads to a set of transactional rules and guidelines devoid of a sense of context. . . . We will not resolve this tension, but we must understand it and look for ways to develop a framework . . . that links the real and ideal in an integrated whole.”<sup>8</sup>

## ■ ENDNOTES

1. Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream* (New York: Tarcher Penguin, 2004) p. 113.
2. John Gardner, “On Building Community,” occasional paper published by the Independent Sector, [www.independentsector.org](http://www.independentsector.org). Quotes from pp. 5, 15, 8.
3. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 288
5. Gale Berkowitz, “UCLA Study on Friendship Among Women,” posted at [www.anapsid.org/cnd/gender/tendfend.html](http://www.anapsid.org/cnd/gender/tendfend.html). Original source, Taylor, S.E., Klein, L.C., Lewis, B.P. Gruenewald, T.L., Gurung, R.A.R., and Updegraff, J.A., “Female Responses to Stress: Tend and Befriend, Not Fight or Flight,” *Psychological Review*, 107(3): 41–429
6. Used by Adam Ferguson in his “An Essay on the History of Civil Society,” published in 1767.
7. Nineteenth-century Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville talked about “the principle of association” while traveling in the United States. His writings have long inspired the nonprofit and philanthropic movements in this country and, by extension, to civil society around the world. This quote is from his *Democracy in America*, The Henry Reeve Text as Revised by Francis Bowen and Further Corrected by Phillips Bradley, Abridged with an Introduction by Thomas Bender (New York: The Modern Library, 1945), p. 404.
8. Paul Pribbenow, Ph.D., CFRE, speaking at the Ethics Think Tank, Washington D.C., September 2005, quoted in “The President’s Report,” *Advancing Philanthropy*, May/June 2006. Copyright © Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) 2006. *Advancing Philanthropy* is the bi-monthly publication of AFP, which promotes philanthropy through advocacy, research, education and certification programs ([www.afpnet.org](http://www.afpnet.org)). All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.