

What Major Donors Expect in a Fundraiser

Excerpt from the second edition of *Mega Gifts: Who Gives Them, Who Gets Them*

I was talking with Malin Burnham the other day. He had recently made a transformational gift to one of the most promising research centers in the nation. It's now called the Burnham Institute (La Jolla, California).

We were discussing what prompted his gift. But more specifically, I wanted to know what qualities he admired most in a fundraiser, someone calling on him for a gift.

Believe me, he's had plenty of folks calling on him. And he's been extremely generous. When I asked the question, he didn't hesitate for a moment.

"There needs to be a near-militant belief in its mission," he tells me. "When someone calls on me, I can tell if there's a passion for the organization. I can actually feel it. If the fundraiser isn't deeply committed, how can they expect me to be?"

Malin also expects a high level of energy.

Just a few days before, a solicitor had called on him. "She was absolutely charged," he says. "As she spoke about her project, there was electricity in the air. I couldn't help but feel the glow."

I could tell Malin was warming up to the subject. "I'll tell you a quality I don't like. Someone calling on me who's pushy. I dig in my feet. Or someone who never stops talking. How are they ever going to know what I'm interested in?"

What he considers the most important attribute of a successful fundraiser, Malin leaves until last.

"Nothing is more important than integrity," he says. "I look for it every time someone calls on me. If it's not there, I can spot it immediately."

I agree with Malin. I consider integrity the mightiest weapon in a fundraiser's arsenal. More important than any other single quality. Its power is explosive. Integrity alone won't get you a ticket to the top, but without it, you can't even begin the journey.

There are some other attributes beyond what Malin Burnham talked to me about.

For one thing, I find the great fundraisers are much like folks who pull up the roots to see if the flowers are still growing! They are itchy by nature. They don't easily suffer standing still or treading water. Status quo is anathema to them.

I'm reminded that every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the lion or it will be eaten. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death.

It doesn't matter whether you're the lion or the gazelle—when the sun comes up, you'd better be running. The great fundraiser understands this.

Oh, there's lots more. Self-confidence. Comfort in one's own skin. Genuine affection for people. Authenticity.

But let me finish with a characteristic I find in all of the great fundraisers: They love their work.

There is a willingness to pay the price—whatever the cost. Their work becomes something of an obsession. It burns like fire in their bones.

You've heard the dictum: No pain, no gain. Success is a moving target. Often, a fundraiser can feel a bit like Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*—"My life is endless trouble and chaos."

There are the long hours, long days, some of which seem never to end. But still there is joy and exhilaration, fulfillment and an inner glow.

When you think about it, the reason is obvious. Fundraising has the power to dramatically impact society in a way no other profession can. And you're an integral part of that noble pursuit.

John R. Mott, one of the great Christian voices of the mid-1900s, was right: "Blessed are the fundraisers," he said, "in heaven they shall stand on the right hand of the martyrs."

Jerold Panas © 2005. Excerpted from the second edition of *Mega Gifts: Who Gives Them, Who Gets Them*. Excerpted with permission of [Emerson & Church, Publishers](#).

Jerold Panas is executive partner of one of America's leading fundraising firms and author of several books, including Asking: A 59-Minute Guide to Everything Board Members, Volunteers, and Staff Must Know to Secure the Gift; The Fundraising Habits of Supremely Successful Boards: A 59-Minute Guide to Assuring Your Organization's Future; and Making the Case: The No-Nonsense Guide to Writing the Perfect Case Statement.