



NONPROFITS: FUNDRAISING & DEVELOPMENT

Fundraisers Seek More Ethical Guidance

07.14.20 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Ahead of its “Ethics Awareness Month” events last October, the Association of Fundraising Professionals ([AFP](#)) polled its members, online, for reasons including identifying “which ethical issues were of most concern” to them.

The survey results should be of interest to the entire nonprofit sector.

[Note: This post was written just before the COVID-19 pandemic swept the nation.]

Ethics in Fundraising

The Association of Fundraising Professionals, created in 1960, describes its mission as “empower[ing] individuals and organizations to practice ethical fundraising through professional education, networking, research and advocacy.”

Its *Code of Ethical Standards* comprises the *AFP Code of Ethical Principles* (1964) and the *ETHICAL STANDARDS* (1964, amended 2014). Together these documents are aspirational statements as well as lists of acceptable and unacceptable behavior for fundraising professionals.

The organization’s president & CEO, Mike Geiger, MBA, CPA, explains in his letter to the AFP membership to kick off “Ethics Awareness Month” that these codes were adopted because the initial AFP leadership “knew there would be moments where fundraisers felt pressure from others to cut corners or ignore ethical principles. Or situations where there might be competing interests, and the fundraiser would have to determine what’s best for the donor, the organization and the profession.”

Survey Results: Frequency of Problems

In *Donor Control, Conflict of Interest and Tainted Money: Key Ethical Concerns for Fundraisers* (October 23, 2019), AFP describes generally the findings of the survey of over 550 of its members.



It begins with a decidedly “glass-half-full” observation: “Most members don’t have to address challenging ethical situations or dilemmas very often.” What is “very often”? Apparently, that means just once a year. But AFP acknowledges that the survey hadn’t specifically defined “challenging” or “dilemmas” so those fundraisers answering these questions “may have different views of the situations they face.”

But almost 17 percent of responding fundraisers say they have troublesome encounters about six times a year; 8 percent deal with them once a month. No wonder the burnout rate among fundraising professionals is skyrocketing and almost half of them report they will leave their current positions within two years. That level of talented, experienced professionals wanting to jump ship is a worrisome development for the nonprofit sector as a whole.

Ethics Survey Findings

The “top ethical concerns” of the responding fundraisers mirror some of the major issues in philanthropy today.

Almost half of those who were asked to select items from a proffered list of such concerns selected “donor control and restrictions on how gifts can be used” as a leading ethical issue in our sector. About 41 percent checked off “conflicts of interest” and 40 percent designated “tainted” donor money.

In the deluge of information and opinion on these thorny topics, they are typically portrayed as matters of concern for top leadership in nonprofit organizations. Too little attention is paid to the reality that fundraisers are frequently on the front lines of these difficult decisions; often, they must face them with little or no useful guidance from their organizations. (One of AFP’s stated reasons for conducting its mid-2019 survey was to identify those topics that fundraisers most urgently need guidance and resources.)

Additional Concerns

Notably, when survey respondents tackled the question of identifying their “top ethical concerns,” they also listed “workplace issues, including sexual harassment and working with top executive staff.”

The Association of Fundraising Professionals has been a leading voice on the serious problem of sexual harassment of fundraisers by powerful nonprofit organization board members, top executive staff, and donors. In Harassment of Fundraisers: A New Report (June 6, 2018), we reported on a first-of-its kind study and survey of sexual harassment of fundraisers conducted by AFP and the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* earlier in 2018. “The results,” we wrote, “are dramatic but not necessarily surprising to fundraising professionals who – over many years – have silently suffered from this kind of abuse.”

Respondents to AFP’s ethics survey from summer 2019 suggested that “fundraising needs a code of ethics or behavior policy for donors.” There are documents like AFP’s ethics codes and its Donor Bill of Rights but they deal with “what donors should expect and receive during the stewardship and giving processes.” But “there is nothing about the donor’s responsibilities.”

Conclusion

AFP’s Mike Geiger believes that fundraisers and their organizations should “think more expansively about ethics” beyond the usual lists of do’s or don’t’s. It’s a “way of thinking—how can we not only



just prevent harm, but actually help everyone achieve and flourish in a just and equitable way?”