Dream big, raise more money

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Once upon I time, when I worked as a development director, I would gather the program staff annually to ask the “what if” questions:

* What if we had all the money we needed?
* What if we could do the work we wanted to do without worrying about the budget – what would we do?
* What if we had the capacity to try new things and do our work differently? What would that look like?

When people open their minds, here’s what happens

The resulting brainstorm was beneficial in several ways.

First, it generated lots of interesting program ideas, some of which actually happened.

Second, it provided an opportunity to discuss “fundability” as one tool for filtering these ideas. What kinds of projects attract money? Why?

Perhaps most importantly, it shifted the collective thinking – at least for the moment – from scarcity to abundance.

Why scarcity mentality inhibits fundraising

As a fundraising trainer, my biggest challenge is addressing **scarcity mentality.** Step one: review the data.

Across the U.S., nonprofits raise roughly $1.5 trillion per year from all sources: fees for service and other earned income, philanthropy, and government funding. That’s almost 8% of the U.S. economy.



If we were our own country – all hail the Nonprofit Nation! – $1.5 trillion would give us the 13th largest economy in the world. That’s bigger than Spain, Australia, or Mexico.

If you know where to look – and you’re willing to do the work – there’s plenty of money available. All successful fundraising begins with an attitude of abundance: the money’s out there — now let’s get organized and raise it.

Moving from scarcity to abundance

The following exercise is designed to move your organization beyond scarcity mentality. Use it when you’re creating your strategic plan, an annual work plan, or simply to help your colleagues think more broadly about what’s possible.

I’ve used this exercise with staff, board, or both working together. If your board is filled with people who respond to every new idea by saying, “We can’t afford that,” this activity might help.

How to facilitate the exercise

1. Gather your colleagues around a table or in a circle and ask the following questions: “If we had all the money we needed, how would our work change? What would we be doing that we aren’t doing now?”

With five or fewer people present, conduct the brainstorm with the full group. With six or more, create smaller breakout groups of at least three people each. Allow 15-20 minutes for this conversation.

2. If you’re working with one large group, write any ideas on a flip chart or white board as they’re discussed. With breakouts, reconvene everyone and ask for reports from each small group, writing their ideas as they are presented.

3. To debrief this exercise, ask the following questions:

• What was your experience during the brainstorm? What did it feel like?
• Which of these ideas seems most fundable to you? Why?
• Do we want to test these ideas with any other audience? Our constituents? Our donors or funders?

4. If you decide to share your thinking with others, work with the group to make assignments (who will talk with whom) and set a deadline for completing the task. One option: organize a focus group to gather feedback.

What is fundability anyway?

The concept of fundability is imprecise – it’s more intuitive than something that can be easily measured.

Fundability includes some combination of a clear need, timeliness, creative problem-solving, capacity to deliver, and a strong “hook.” Hooks can be emotional – for example, a compelling story – or perhaps a new way of framing and addressing a long-standing problem.

Seasoned fundraisers develop a pretty strong sense of which programs and initiatives have sales appeal and which will be harder to sell.

As a facilitator, you don’t need to be an expert on fundability. Your job is to tease out the reasons why people believe that a particular idea has the potential – or not – to attract funding.

Testing your ideas with others (step 4 above) will help to clarify which might generate fundraising traction.

*This exercise is adapted from*[*Train Your Board (and Everyone Else) to Raise Money*](http://trainyourboard.com/training/train-your-board-book/)*, which I co-wrote with my colleague Andrea Kihlstedt.*

*It includes 50 additional exercises to support your fundraising. Check it out!*