

TELLING THEIR STORIES: SHIFTING TO EMPATHETIC, COMMUNITY-BASED STRATEGIES
FOR NONPROFIT FUNDRAISING

By
SOPHIA SMITH-GATTO

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Professor Harris Kornstein
Department of Public and Applied Humanities

Abstract

This fundraising handbook explores an empathy-based, community-centered approach to nonprofit fundraising, emphasizing inclusivity, emotional connection, and meaningful engagement with communities being served. It demonstrates how nonprofits can build deeper relationships by prioritizing the lived experiences of their communities and fostering a respectful and understanding environment.

Empathy-driven fundraising moves beyond traditional donor-centered models, focusing on authentic, person-centered interactions. By centering the needs of both attendees and donors, nonprofits can cultivate a culture of giving rooted in trust, compassion, and shared values. This approach highlights communication, transparency, and reflection in fundraising efforts, ensuring that organizations raise funds while building long-term, meaningful relationships.

This handbook is the result of applied humanities research conducted for an Honors service-learning thesis in partnership with Drag Story Hour-Arizona (DSH-Az). The research is based on a literature review, internship experiences, a community survey, and analysis of past DSH-Az fundraising events. This handbook provides practical tools for nonprofits like DSH-Az to implement empathetic, community-based fundraising principles. By utilizing inclusive, responsive practices, nonprofits can increase their impact and foster lasting engagement with their communities.

Ultimately, this work demonstrates that successful fundraising is not just about raising money—it's about building connections that empower communities, honor their voices, and foster shared purpose.

Telling Their Stories

Shifting to Empathetic, Community-
Based Strategies for Nonprofit
Fundraising

A Fundraising Handbook by Sophia Smith-Gatto



Table of Contents

About this Handbook.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Handbook Outline.....	9
Understanding Empathy in Fundraising.....	12
What is Empathy?.....	12
Key Components of Empathy.....	12
Empathy vs. Related Concepts.....	13
How Empathy Functions in Social Contexts.....	13
The Role of Empathy in Nonprofit Fundraising.....	14
Empathy as a Foundation for Ethical Fundraising.....	15
Key Ways Empathy Enhances Fundraising.....	15
Barriers To & Limitations of Empathy in Traditional Fundraising.....	16
Empathy as a Transactional Tool & the Commodification of Empathy.....	16
Selective Empathy & the "Deserving Poor".....	17
Empathy Without Structural Change or Accountability.....	17
The Role of Philanthropy & Fundraising Events in Reinforcing Inequities & Power Imbalances.....	18
Empathy as a Stand-In for Action.....	19
The Limitations of Emotional Appeals.....	20
Moving Beyond Traditional Models.....	20
Empathy-Based Fundraising Principles.....	22
Listening to the Community.....	22
Representation & Inclusivity.....	23
Transparency & Accountability.....	24
Practical Strategies for Implementing Empathy in Fundraising.....	26
Rethinking Fundraising Beyond Transactional Giving.....	27
Analysis of DSH-Az's Previous Fundraising.....	29
Event Analyses.....	29
2020 End of the Year Blow Out (Virtual).....	30
Financial & Administrative Effectiveness Evaluation.....	30
Empathy-Based Fundraising Evaluation.....	30
2024 Birthday Fundraiser: Fighting for the Freedom to Read! (In-Person).....	31
Financial & Administrative Effectiveness Evaluation.....	31
Empathy-Based Fundraising Evaluation.....	32
Comparative Findings & Key Takeaways.....	33
Financial & Administrative Effectiveness Comparison.....	33

Empathy-Based Fundraising Comparison.....	33
Key Takeaways.....	34
Survey Data Overview & Analysis.....	35
Overview of Survey Responses.....	35
Key Findings.....	36
Motivations for Attending Drag Story Hours.....	36
Key Takeaways from Story Hours.....	37
Actions Inspired by Story Hours.....	38
Future Engagement & Advocacy.....	39
Implications for Fundraising & Community Engagement.....	40
Planning an Empathy-Based, Community-Centered Fundraising Event.....	42
Setting Goals.....	42
Prioritizing Impact With Revenue.....	42
Building Accountability into Goals.....	43
Engaging the Community.....	43
Authentic Community Involvement.....	43
Prioritizing Accessibility & Inclusion.....	44
Building Genuine Connections During the Event.....	44
Creating Empathy-Driven Appeals.....	45
Storytelling with Dignity & Strength.....	45
Humanizing the Cause Through Visuals.....	45
Framing Contributions as Acts of Solidarity.....	45
Transparency & Accountability in Appeals.....	46
Designing the Event Experience.....	46
Pre-Event: Laying the Foundation.....	47
Curating the Event Program.....	47
Choosing the Venue.....	47
Funding the Event.....	49
Planning for Event Revenue.....	51
Promoting the Event.....	52
Ensuring Safety & Security.....	54
During the Event: Execution with Empathy.....	56
Guest Entry & Registration.....	56
Raffle & Auction Management.....	57
Food & Drink Management.....	59
Program Execution.....	60
Staff Coordination & Day-of Plan.....	61

Volunteer Engagement & Inclusion.....	63
Post-Event: Reflecting, Evaluating, & Improving.....	64
Empathy-Driven Metrics.....	65
Community Feedback.....	66
Continuous Improvement.....	67
Moving Forward with Empathy-Based Fundraising.....	69
Practical Tools & Strategies.....	70
Storytelling Tips.....	70
Donor Engagement Techniques.....	71
Sample Templates & Checklists.....	73
Event Planning Checklist.....	73
Donor Outreach Email Template.....	74
Post-Event Feedback Survey Template.....	74
Additional Resources.....	75
Sources.....	76

About this Handbook

This handbook was created as part of the author's Honors Thesis for the W. A. Franke Honors College at the University of Arizona, supervised by Professor Harris Kornstein. The project explores an empathy-based, community-centered approach to nonprofit fundraising, with a focus on Drag Story Hour-Arizona (DSH-Az). It provides practical tools and strategies designed to help nonprofits build authentic, lasting connections with their communities while enhancing their fundraising efforts.

The author, Sophia Smith-Gatto, is a graduating senior at the University of Arizona, majoring in Applied Humanities with an emphasis in Public Health. Throughout her academic career, Sophia has completed three nonprofit fundraising internships, each contributing unique insights into the community-focused fundraising practices explored here. These internships include work with:

- **The University of Arizona's Campus Pantry:** As the Development Chair, Sophia planned fundraising events and coordinated donation drives, providing essential items to 1,600+ students, staff, and faculty experiencing food insecurity each week.
- **Drag Story Hour-Arizona (DSH-Az):** As the Fundraising Intern, Sophia organized DSH-Az's fifth birthday fundraiser, developed a fundraising handbook with strategies and documentation for the event, and built community partnerships to support the event's mission of advocating for inclusive and diverse literacy programming.
- **The American Heart Association (AHA):** As the Development and Community Events Intern, Sophia supported fundraising and event coordination for the AHA's three major fundraising campaigns in Southern Arizona, learning the intricacies of large-scale fundraising events and relationship-building efforts aimed at engaging and retaining donors.

These hands-on experiences have deepened Sophia's understanding of nonprofit fundraising and shaped the strategies discussed in this handbook, which merges academic research with practical, real-world applications.

Introduction

Laughter fills the room as a performer, dressed in vibrant colors and sparkling sequins, turns the page of a picture book. Wide-eyed children sit cross-legged on a cozy rug, leaning in, captivated by the rhythmic cadence of the story. Parents and caregivers smile, watching as their little ones giggle, ask questions, and see themselves reflected in the pages of diverse, inclusive stories. The air hums with joy and belonging—this is a Drag Story Hour-Arizona (DSH-Az) event, where storytelling becomes an act of celebration, affirmation, and empowerment.

But behind the warmth and magic of these moments lies an ongoing challenge: ensuring these spaces remain safe, well-funded, and protected from misinformation. Like many nonprofits, DSH-Az faces the reality that sustaining its mission requires financial resources. Traditional nonprofit fundraising models are often donor-centered, prioritizing the wants and preferences of funders over the actual needs of the community being served. While financial support is essential, allowing donor priorities to dictate strategy can lead to challenges. This approach can contribute to white saviorism (a phenomenon in which those from privileged backgrounds attempt to "save" marginalized communities without addressing the root causes of inequality), a lack of intersectionality (where organizations fail to recognize the interconnectedness of social identities and how race, gender, and other factors shape people's experiences, leading to exclusion or oversimplification), and competition between organizations (which fosters an environment where nonprofits compete for limited resources instead of collaborating to create collective impact). All of these factors can undermine a nonprofit's core purpose: making a meaningful impact on its community.

As an alternative, this research explores an empathy-based, community-centered approach to nonprofit fundraising in partnership with DSH-Az, a nonprofit organization that fights against the lack of inclusive literacy programming in Arizona by providing inclusive story hours to the children of Arizona and their grown-ups. During these story hours, children are inspired to be themselves through books, songs, and artistic expression. Their story hours also give guests the opportunity to experience the diverse world of children's literature, allowing them to leave story hours equipped with vital literacy skills.

As discovered through meetings with DSH-Az's Executive Director, the organization's biggest needs are to ensure the safety and security of their programs, the availability of funds to put on story hours, and protection from widespread misinformation about the story hours and organization as a whole. These priorities have directly informed both the research for and development of this handbook.

This fundraising handbook serves as a practical toolkit designed to support DSH-Az's events-based fundraising efforts through an empathetic, community-centered approach. Moreover, exploring an empathy-based, community-centered approach to fundraising could offer new base guidelines not only for DSH-Az but also for any nonprofits struggling with fundraising, yielding pivotal outcomes, such as improved fundraising revenue, advancement of the nonprofit's mission, and using fundraising to actively promote the community.

DSH-Az's story hours have long been successful in fostering emotional development and promoting empathy among participants, especially children, by exposing them to diverse experiences and perspectives. This existing strength in community-building and empathy—central to DSH-Az's mission—is already evident through its storytelling events, which create a foundation for deeper connections and inclusivity. While these tools have been effectively applied in storytelling, this handbook now encourages DSH-Az to translate these same strategies into their fundraising practices, ensuring that their fundraising efforts also reflect these community-centered, empathetic principles.

Handbook Outline

The subsequent handbook sections will explore various facets of empathy in fundraising, offering practical tools and strategies for creating ethical, inclusive, and impactful fundraising events.

To start, "Understanding Empathy in Fundraising" serves as the theoretical foundation for the empathy-based, community-centered approach to nonprofit fundraising being explored throughout the handbook. Its first subsection, "What is Empathy?," defines empathy, discussing its core components and the ways it functions socially, while also clarifying the distinctions between empathy and related concepts such as sympathy and emotional contagion. Then, "The Role of Empathy in Nonprofit Fundraising" examines the

importance of empathy in reshaping nonprofit fundraising practices, focusing on how empathy fosters ethical storytelling and builds deeper, more authentic relationships with donors. "Barriers to & Limitations of Empathy in Traditional Fundraising" addresses the challenges and pitfalls of using empathy in traditional fundraising models, especially when it is commodified or manipulated for donor engagement. This section also provides insights into how empathy can sometimes reinforce power imbalances or perpetuate inequities, setting the stage for a more thoughtful approach.

Next, "Empathy-Based Fundraising Principles" introduces key principles for implementing empathy in fundraising efforts. This will include strategies for listening to the community, ensuring representation and inclusivity, and maintaining transparency throughout the fundraising process, all of which are essential for building trust and fostering long-term support.

Following this, the handbook provides an analysis of DSH-Az's previous fundraising efforts. In "Event Analyses," two key fundraising events are evaluated to assess their effectiveness and how they implement empathy-based fundraising approaches. In "Survey Data Overview & Analysis," the handbook analyzes survey data collected as part of the research, with responses from DSH-Az's community offering insights into motivations for attendance, key takeaways, and actions inspired by these events. The findings are then linked to broader implications for fundraising and community engagement, highlighting key lessons that can inform future efforts.

The handbook then transitions into "Planning an Empathy-Based, Community-Centered Fundraising Event," which offers a step-by-step approach to creating a successful fundraising event. This section emphasizes goal-setting, community involvement, and the design of empathy-driven appeals. It also covers the logistics of event execution, from promoting the event to ensuring that the community's voices are central throughout the process.

This handbook culminates in "Moving Forward with Empathy-Based Fundraising," which invites readers to reflect on how the principles of an empathy-driven fundraising approach can enhance future nonprofit initiatives, emphasizing the foundation this approach provides for ongoing growth and meaningful impact. The section encourages nonprofits to investigate how to adapt these principles to various contexts, and to explore

emerging trends in fundraising, such as digital engagement and social media strategies, to broaden their reach, deepen connections, and strengthen long-term support.

To further support the implementation of empathy-based fundraising practices, the handbook also includes supplementary resources, providing “Practical Tools & Strategies,” which includes “Storytelling Tips” and “Donor Engagement Techniques,” as well as “Sample Templates & Checklists” and “Additional Resources” designed to help nonprofits put empathy-based, community-centered fundraising strategies into action.

Understanding Empathy in Fundraising

What is Empathy?

Empathy is the ability to understand, feel, and share another person's emotional world while maintaining a distinction between self and other. It is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that has been widely debated across disciplines, including psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and cultural studies.

Key Components of Empathy

Through extensive research and scholarly debate, four core elements of empathy have emerged (Håkansson Eklund & Summer Meranius, 2021). These components represent different dimensions of empathy, and while they often coexist, they can also be experienced independently depending on the context.

1. **Understanding** – A cognitive process involving the recognition and comprehension of another person's emotional state. This includes perspective-taking, theory of mind (understanding that others have thoughts and feelings different from one's own), and knowledge of social or cultural contexts that shape emotions (Engelen & Röttger-Rössler, 2012).
2. **Feeling** – The affective dimension of empathy, where one emotionally resonates with another person's experience. While not always identical to the other's emotions, this shared affect helps foster deeper human connections (Håkansson Eklund & Summer Meranius, 2021).
3. **Sharing** – The process of experiencing a state similar to that of another person, often through automatic neural mechanisms like mirror neurons, which activate when we observe someone else's emotions (Cuff et al., 2016).
4. **Self-Other Differentiation** – A crucial aspect of empathy that distinguishes it from emotional contagion. Empathy requires recognizing that the emotions one experiences in response to another's feelings still belong to the other person (Håkansson Eklund & Summer Meranius, 2021).

These four components form the foundation of most modern conceptualizations of empathy, balancing both cognitive and emotional dimensions while preserving a necessary boundary between self and other. While these elements may often be present simultaneously, they can also manifest individually, depending on the situation and the individual's engagement with the other's emotions.

Empathy vs. Related Concepts

Empathy is frequently confused with related but distinct concepts, including:

- **Sympathy** – Feeling *for* someone, rather than with them. Sympathy is often associated with pity or concern but lacks the deep emotional engagement of empathy (Cuff et al., 2016).
- **Compassion** – A response to another's suffering that includes a motivation to help, often stemming from empathy but distinguished by an action-oriented component (Cuff et al., 2016).
- **Emotional Contagion** – Automatically “catching” another person's emotions without consciously understanding them, leading to a blending of self and other rather than a distinct recognition of another's feelings (Håkansson Eklund & Summer Meranius, 2021).

Understanding these distinctions is essential for ensuring that interactions based on empathy are genuine and constructive rather than rooted in pity or emotional manipulation.

How Empathy Functions in Social Contexts

Empathy does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by cultural, social, and neurological factors. Research highlights the following key considerations:

- **Cognitive vs. Affective Empathy** – Some scholars distinguish between cognitive empathy (understanding another's feelings intellectually) and affective empathy (feeling another's emotions). While they can function separately, they frequently interact (Engelen & Röttger-Rössler, 2012).

- **Cultural Influences** – Empathy is shaped by cultural norms and expectations. Different societies emphasize or suppress empathic responses based on social structures, values, and historical experiences.
- **Situational and Personal Factors** – Empathy is not a fixed trait; it is influenced by individual experiences, emotional states, and social dynamics. People may empathize more with those they perceive as similar to themselves, which can reinforce in-group biases (Cuff et al., 2016).
- **Empathy's Limits and Risks** – While empathy can drive meaningful connections, it can also lead to emotional exhaustion, bias, or even be used manipulatively (e.g., by individuals who understand others' emotions but exploit them for personal gain) (Engelen & Röttger-Rössler, 2012).

Empathy is a dynamic, multifaceted process that involves understanding, feeling, and sharing another person's emotions while maintaining a clear distinction between self and other. It is shaped by cognitive and affective mechanisms, social and cultural contexts, and personal experiences (Håkansson Eklund & Summer Meranius, 2021).

By deepening our understanding of empathy and its nuances, we can cultivate more meaningful human connections and foster interactions that are based on genuine care and understanding.

The Role of Empathy in Nonprofit Fundraising

Empathy plays a fundamental role in nonprofit fundraising by shifting the focus from transactional donor-recipient relationships to deeper, community-centered engagement. Traditional fundraising models often prioritize donors' interests, emphasizing emotional appeals that center their generosity. In contrast, an empathy-driven approach ensures that the needs, voices, and experiences of the communities served remain at the forefront, challenging power imbalances and fostering ethical, inclusive giving (Ivancic, 2017).

Empathy as a Foundation for Ethical Fundraising

Empathy fosters meaningful connections between nonprofits, donors, and the communities they serve. It is important to consider the direction of empathy in these relationships. For instance, empathy often flows from donors to the communities they aim to support, but it is equally crucial to recognize how communities empathize with donors or staff. In empathetic fundraising, this reciprocal empathy enriches relationships, where donors not only empathize with the challenges faced by communities but also develop a deeper understanding of the needs, strengths, and aspirations of those they support. On the other hand, communities' empathy toward donors can humanize the relationship, shifting it from a transactional interaction to a partnership grounded in shared values and respect.

Rather than relying on narratives of pity or saviorism, empathetic fundraising prioritizes storytelling that respects the dignity and agency of beneficiaries. By centering lived experiences and authentic relationships, organizations can cultivate long-term support based on solidarity rather than guilt-driven giving. Research has shown that empathy enhances moral recognition of ethical situations, leading to more ethical decision-making and a broader awareness of stakeholder impact (Cartabuke et al., 2019).

Key Ways Empathy Enhances Fundraising

- **Authentic Storytelling** – Empathy allows nonprofits to craft narratives that highlight strengths, resilience, and the real impact of donor contributions. Ethical storytelling ensures that individuals and communities are represented with dignity rather than being reduced to their hardships (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007).
- **Deeper Donor Engagement** – When donors understand the experiences of those they are supporting, they are more likely to remain engaged and committed. Empathy fosters a sense of shared purpose, encouraging donors to view themselves as partners in the mission rather than mere financial contributors (Kim & Kou, 2014).
- **Community-Centered Approach** – An empathy-driven model prioritizes listening to and amplifying the voices of the people nonprofits serve. This approach ensures

that fundraising strategies align with community needs rather than donor preferences (Pascual-Ferrá, 2019).

- **Long-Term Relationship Building** – Empathetic fundraising shifts the focus from short-term transactions to long-term partnerships. By fostering genuine connections with both donors and beneficiaries, nonprofits can create sustainable support networks (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007).
- **Reducing Harmful Power Dynamics** – Traditional fundraising often reinforces power imbalances by positioning donors as saviors. An empathy-based model works to dismantle these dynamics, instead emphasizing mutual respect, collaboration, and shared humanity (Ivancic, 2017).
- **Promoting Social Justice** – Studies suggest that empathy fosters prosocial behavior and altruistic motivation, making individuals more likely to recognize the need for systemic change and engage in social justice efforts (Cartabuke et al., 2019). Empathy in nonprofit fundraising can thus be a driving force behind advocacy and transformative social impact.

Barriers To & Limitations of Empathy in Traditional Fundraising

While empathy is often seen as a driving force in nonprofit fundraising, traditional fundraising models rely on forms of empathy that can be limited, exclusionary, or even harmful. The ways in which empathy is cultivated and leveraged in donor-centered fundraising often reinforce problematic power dynamics, prioritize donor emotions over systemic change, and fail to address the root causes of inequity.

Empathy as a Transactional Tool & the Commodification of Empathy

Traditional fundraising frequently relies on emotional appeals designed to elicit donor empathy, with this empathy frequently being used as a marketing tool rather than a catalyst for genuine social transformation. Fundraising appeals often center around emotional narratives of suffering and hardship to elicit immediate emotional reactions from donors. While these stories can be effective in securing donations in the short-term, they

often reinforce a problematic savior dynamic in which donors are positioned as benevolent rescuers rather than as true partners in social change, and it risks minimizing the lived experiences of marginalized communities to consumable narratives for donor engagement. This form of fundraising threatens to reduce people in need to objects of pity rather than recognizing them as agents of their own solutions (Ahn, 2017). As seen in the virtual reality (VR) industry's claims of being an "empathy machine," digital tools are increasingly used to create immersive experiences where users can "see through the eyes" of marginalized people (Nakamura, 2020). However, these experiences often prioritize the emotions of privileged audiences rather than addressing the systemic causes of inequality. Empathy becomes a product—something to be felt and consumed—rather than a force that leads to action.

Additionally, emotional appeals in fundraising can be extractive, using the pain and suffering of marginalized communities to generate funds without ensuring that those communities retain agency over their own stories and resources. This can lead to a cycle where nonprofits continuously showcase hardship to attract donations rather than highlighting resilience, strength, and systemic solutions. Over time, this model can cultivate a short-term, crisis-driven approach to fundraising that prioritizes immediate donor gratification over sustainable change.

Selective Empathy & the "Deserving Poor"

Fundraising campaigns often frame beneficiaries as "blameless victims" to maximize donor support. Research on national charitable campaigns shows that donors are more likely to give to individuals perceived as helpless and innocent while ignoring or blaming those seen as responsible for their own suffering (Van Leeuwen & Wiepking, 2013). This reinforces harmful stereotypes, as campaigns strategically depict beneficiaries in ways that appeal to donor biases rather than honoring the full complexity of their lives. Empathy, in this case, becomes conditional—offered only to those who fit within an acceptable narrative of need.

Empathy Without Structural Change or Accountability

Critiques of VR as an "empathy machine" provide a useful parallel for understanding how donor-centered fundraising often turns empathy into a passive, feel-good experience

rather than a catalyst for meaningful change. VR documentaries that claim to immerse users in the experiences of refugees, people in poverty, or those facing racial injustice often produce a fleeting sense of emotional connection but do not translate into sustained action or systemic reform. Instead, they allow privileged audiences to "feel good about feeling bad"—momentarily engaging with another's suffering without being accountable to real solutions (Nakamura, 2020).

Similarly, in fundraising, donors may be encouraged to engage in philanthropy based on how giving makes them feel rather than on a commitment to dismantling systemic inequities. Nonprofits risk reinforcing a model where wealthy donors receive emotional validation for their generosity while maintaining control over resources and decision-making, rather than redistributing power to the communities they claim to support.

This form of empathy-driven philanthropy often provides temporary relief without addressing the root causes of injustice, as large foundations and elite donors use charitable giving to maintain control over how social issues are addressed while avoiding the taxation that could fund public solutions (Ahn, 2017). This results in a philanthropic system where wealthy individuals can feel good about giving, even as their financial influence perpetuates inequality. Nonprofits that rely on traditional donor-centered models may struggle to challenge these systems, as their funding depends on maintaining relationships with donors rather than advocating for systemic change.

The Role of Philanthropy & Fundraising Events in Reinforcing Inequities & Power Imbalances

Philanthropy itself can limit the transformative potential of empathy in fundraising. Many large foundations and major donors use philanthropy as a means of maintaining financial control, shielding their wealth from taxation while positioning themselves as benevolent actors. Because these philanthropic models are designed to preserve elite influence, they often fail to challenge the systems that create the very inequalities they claim to address (Ahn, 2017).

Traditional donor-centered models of fundraising reflect this imbalance. Nonprofits, reliant on large gifts, may shape their fundraising strategies around the expectations and

preferences of wealthy donors, rather than centering the actual needs and leadership of the communities they serve. This creates a dynamic where fundraising strategies are designed to make donors feel good rather than to create real, lasting change. The tax benefits associated with charitable giving further allow donors to direct funds toward causes they personally deem worthy rather than ensuring those funds are democratically allocated. This structure limits the ability of marginalized communities to determine their own priorities and perpetuates a system in which access to resources is dictated by elite generosity rather than community-led decision-making.

Furthermore, fundraising events often replicate inequitable social hierarchies rather than working to dismantle them. Exclusive galas, high-priced charity dinners, and benefit concerts cater to affluent donors while marginalizing the very communities they aim to support. The Benefit on Main (BOM) fundraiser, which raises money for food insecurity through an expensive gourmet dinner, exemplifies this contradiction. While celebrated as a community event, its exclusivity and the absence of food-insecure individuals at the table highlight how traditional fundraising methods can reinforce social divides rather than bridging them (Ivancic, 2017). Events like BOM enable attendees to feel charitable without challenging the economic structures that create food insecurity in the first place.

Empathy as a Stand-In for Action

One of the biggest limitations of empathy in fundraising is its tendency to substitute feeling for meaningful action. Just as VR experiences can create the illusion of “walking in someone else’s shoes” without requiring users to engage in real-world advocacy (Nakamura, 2020), traditional fundraising can create a sense of accomplishment for donors without addressing systemic change. Emotional engagement is valuable, but when it is not paired with a shift in power or resources, it becomes another form of performative allyship (i.e., actions or expressions of support that are done more for show or social approval rather than creating substantial, long-term change) that benefits donors more than communities in need.

The Limitations of Emotional Appeals

While empathy-driven storytelling is a key component of many fundraising strategies, research shows that certain forms of empathy—such as personal distress—can

actually reduce charitable giving. When donors feel overwhelmed by depictions of suffering, they may disengage or avoid giving altogether. Studies suggest that framing fundraising messages with hope and empowerment, rather than distress and despair, can lead to more sustained donor engagement. Additionally, excessive reliance on empathy-based fundraising can create "compassion fatigue" (Nakamura, 2020), where donors become desensitized to suffering and less willing to contribute over time.

Moving Beyond Traditional Models

To move beyond the limitations of traditional fundraising models, nonprofits must critically examine how they cultivate and leverage empathy in fundraising. Instead of centering donor emotions, they can prioritize models that shift power to communities. Ethical storytelling, transparency, and accountability to the communities being served must replace extractive, pity-based narratives. To move beyond these transactional models and lay the groundwork for implementing empathy-based fundraising principles, nonprofits must first focus on:

- **Prioritizing Structural Change** – Advocacy and systemic solutions should be central to fundraising efforts rather than secondary to donor engagement.
- **Challenging Donor Control** – Encouraging funders to relinquish decision-making power and support community-led initiatives.
- **Rethinking Fundraising Narratives** – Moving away from "poverty porn" and towards storytelling that honors agency, resilience, and systemic realities.
- **Redesigning Fundraising Events** – Ensuring events are inclusive and do not reinforce class barriers.

Empathy must be connected to justice, solidarity, and long-term systemic change, rather than serving as a tool for reinforcing existing hierarchies. Nonprofits have an opportunity to reshape fundraising as a means of redistributing power and resources, ensuring that the communities most affected by systemic issues have a voice in shaping solutions. By recognizing and addressing the barriers and limitations of traditional empathy-driven fundraising, organizations can work toward more equitable and community-centered models of philanthropy.

Empathy-Based Fundraising Principles

Empathy-based fundraising prioritizes relationships, ethical storytelling, and community-driven approaches over transactional donor-recipient dynamics. This model ensures that fundraising aligns with the needs and voices of the communities served rather than being dictated by external funders or traditional philanthropy's often extractive practices. While the principles of empathy-based fundraising are drawn from a wide range of research, this section highlights two case studies: Project South and UNICEF Egypt's *Lives Beyond Figures (LBF)*. Project South integrates grassroots movement-building with fundraising by involving communities in decision-making and organizing. Likewise, UNICEF Egypt's *LBF* uses ethical storytelling to engage audiences by centering the resilience and strength of marginalized communities without reinforcing saviorism. The following principles—listening to the community, representation and inclusivity, and transparency and accountability—are central to an ethical and effective empathy-based fundraising approach.

Listening to the Community

At the core of empathy-based fundraising is a commitment to centering the voices and needs of the community. Too often, fundraising strategies are shaped by donor preferences rather than the lived realities of those being served. Listening deeply ensures that nonprofits remain responsive, relevant, and accountable.

- **Prioritizing Community-Led Decision-Making** – Fundraising should be an extension of community organizing, not a detached function. Grassroots fundraising models, such as those used by Project South, integrate fundraising with movement-building efforts by hiring organizers to fundraise rather than relying solely on development professionals (Guilloud & Cordery, 2017). This approach ensures that funding strategies align with the community's goals rather than external pressures.
- **Using Fundraising as a Feedback Mechanism** – A lack of community engagement in fundraising—whether through donations, participation, or volunteerism—can be a sign that an organization is out of step with community priorities. For example,

Project South uses small registration fees for workshops as a way to gauge interest and reassess programming when engagement declines (Guilloud & Cordery, 2017).

- **Ethical Narrative Approaches** – As demonstrated by UNICEF Egypt’s *LBF*, ethical nonprofit storytelling should immerse audiences in the experiences of marginalized communities without reinforcing saviorism or guilt-based appeals. The book’s approach to broadcast empathy allowed readers to relate to the narrators’ struggles and strengths without being framed as the sole solution to their problems (Al-Sabbagh, 2022).
- **Respecting Community Expertise** – Fundraising campaigns should not present communities as passive recipients of aid. Instead, they should highlight their leadership, resilience, and solutions. The narrators in *LBF* were portrayed as the heroes of their own stories, taking action to improve their circumstances rather than waiting for external help. This approach fosters dignity and encourages solidarity rather than pity (Al-Sabbagh, 2022).

Representation & Inclusivity

Fundraising strategies and materials must reflect the diverse identities and experiences of the communities they support. Inclusivity in representation helps dismantle harmful narratives and ensures that all voices are valued in the fundraising process.

- **Avoiding Stereotypes and Exploitative Imagery** – Many traditional nonprofit campaigns rely on “poverty porn,” which exploits the suffering of marginalized groups to elicit donations. These depictions not only strip individuals of their dignity but can also lead to emotional fatigue and aversion among potential donors (Al-Sabbagh, 2022). Instead, ethical storytelling should highlight the broader social and economic structures shaping inequality while portraying individuals as agents of change.
- **Breaking the Boundary Between Donors and Communities** – Rather than positioning donors as saviors, nonprofits should foster empathy by immersing audiences in the lived realities of those they support. *LBF* achieved this by using first-person narratives, colloquial language, and eye-level photography to remove

hierarchical divides between readers and storytellers. This approach encouraged audiences to see themselves in the narrators, rather than as distant benefactors (Al-Sabbagh, 2022).

- **Inclusive Fundraising Models** – Fundraising efforts should ensure that all members of the community—regardless of economic status—have ways to contribute. Sliding-scale membership models, such as those used by Project South, allow individuals to support organizations financially at different levels, while also valuing non-monetary contributions like skills and labor (Guilloud & Cordery, 2017).
- **Ethical Language and Messaging** – The words used in fundraising materials matter. They should reflect the agency, strength, and self-determination of the people being served rather than positioning them as helpless or dependent. The use of conversational, community-centered language, as seen in *LBF*, helps reinforce authenticity and connection (Al-Sabbagh, 2022).

Transparency & Accountability

Transparency in fundraising is essential for maintaining trust, ensuring ethical financial practices, and keeping nonprofits accountable to the communities they serve. Empathy-based fundraising prioritizes financial honesty, clear communication, and community accountability mechanisms over performative donor engagement.

- **Shifting Away from Foundation Dependency** – While foundation grants may seem like a reliable funding source, they often lead to mission drift, forcing organizations to adapt to funder priorities rather than community needs. Moreover, they create a cycle of dependency that undermines long-term sustainability (Guilloud & Cordery, 2017). Instead, prioritizing grassroots funding—through individual giving, membership programs, and community partnerships—ensures greater financial independence and alignment with social justice goals.
- **Ensuring Funds Benefit the Community** – Many nonprofit campaigns are criticized for spending significant donor funds on high-cost advertising rather than direct community impact. Ethical fundraising strategies, like the free digital

distribution of *LBF*, demonstrate that nonprofits can raise awareness and mobilize support without diverting excessive funds from their mission (Al-Sabbagh, 2022).

- **Honest and Accessible Reporting** – Donors and community members should have access to clear, transparent reports on how funds are allocated. Instead of vague impact statements, nonprofits should provide concrete examples of how funds are used and ensure that financial reports are publicly available in accessible language.
- **Accountability Through Membership** – A membership-based fundraising model ensures that nonprofits remain accountable to their communities. If community members disengage or stop contributing, it signals that the organization’s work may no longer be meeting their needs. Project South uses this model not only for fundraising but as a built-in accountability mechanism to ensure alignment with grassroots priorities (Guilloud & Cordery, 2017).
- **Empathy as a Guardrail Against Capitalist Pressures** – Even grassroots organizations can fall into the trap of prioritizing financial sustainability over mission alignment. Nonprofits must consistently evaluate whether their fundraising strategies align with their ethical commitments, asking themselves: Are we serving the community, or are we chasing funding? (Guilloud & Cordery, 2017). To live up to this standard, nonprofits can regularly assess their funding sources and their alignment with community-driven goals. One approach could be to create a “mission-alignment audit” as part of the fundraising strategy, where each potential funding source is evaluated based on how well it supports the nonprofit’s mission and values. This could include asking key questions: Does this funding opportunity align with the community’s needs? Does it require us to compromise our values or adjust our mission? What are the long-term implications of accepting this funding? Nonprofits can also create feedback loops with their communities—through surveys, focus groups, or community advisory boards—to ensure their fundraising efforts are still in line with the people they serve.

Empathy-based fundraising redefines fundraising as an ethical, community-driven practice that prioritizes relationships over transactions. By centering the voices of the

communities served, breaking down harmful power dynamics, and ensuring financial transparency, nonprofits can build sustainable and justice-oriented funding models. Rather than treating fundraising as a separate, uncomfortable necessity, organizations should integrate it into their organizing strategies—using it as a tool to redistribute wealth, build solidarity, and sustain long-term movements for change.

Practical Strategies for Implementing Empathy in Fundraising

While fundraising is a necessary tool for sustaining nonprofit work, it should not be viewed as a substitute for structural change. Empathy-driven fundraising acknowledges the contradictions of charity-based models, in which fundraising events sometimes reinforce the very inequalities they aim to address (Ivancic, 2017). Instead of relying on donor-driven priorities, nonprofits should engage in fundraising efforts that empower the communities they serve, ensuring they have a say in how funds are raised and distributed.

Empathy can transform nonprofit fundraising from a transactional process into a relationship-driven practice rooted in respect, dignity, and shared commitment. By prioritizing authentic storytelling, ethical engagement, and community-driven strategies, nonprofits can build sustainable fundraising models that uplift the voices of those they serve while fostering deeper, long-term support. Research also suggests that empathy is a key factor in promoting social justice and ethical decision-making, making it an essential tool for nonprofits striving for systemic change (Cartabuke et al., 2019).

To implement empathy effectively in fundraising, organizations can adopt practical strategies that prioritize community involvement, transparency, and ethical engagement. Below are key strategies that can help nonprofits integrate empathy into their fundraising practices:

- **Listen First** – Engage directly with community members to understand their needs and perspectives before designing fundraising campaigns.
- **Use Ethical Imagery and Language** – Avoid exploitative images and wording that reinforce stereotypes or diminish the agency of those being supported (Pascual-Ferrá, 2019).

- **Provide Transparent Impact Reports** – Show donors the tangible effects of their contributions through honest and meaningful updates (Van Leeuwen & Wiepking, 2013).
- **Encourage Donor Reflection** – Invite donors to reflect on their own connection to the cause, fostering deeper investment and understanding (Sargeant & Woodliffe, 2007).
- **Engage in Two-Way Communication** – Instead of treating fundraising as a one-sided request for money, create opportunities for dialogue and mutual learning between donors and the communities served (Ivancic, 2017).
- **Incorporate Empathy into Organizational Culture** – Research suggests that empathy should be embedded into decision-making processes, employee training, and nonprofit leadership development (Cartabuke et al., 2019). Building an organizational culture that prioritizes empathy can enhance ethical considerations in fundraising strategies.

Rethinking Fundraising Beyond Transactional Giving

By rethinking nonprofit fundraising beyond transactional giving, it becomes not just a means of financial support, but a tool for social transformation and solidarity. When rooted in empathy, fundraising goes beyond the exchange of money; it becomes a vehicle for redistributing power, promoting inclusivity, and amplifying marginalized voices. Fundraising events, when designed with community involvement and empowerment at their core, can build bridges between donors, organizations, and the communities they support, creating shared ownership of both the fundraising process and the impact it generates. By fostering solidarity through collective action, empathy-driven fundraising encourages sustained advocacy and long-term commitment to dismantling inequities. Instead of merely funding a program, these events become part of a larger movement for change, where each donation and each action contributes to a broader vision of justice and community empowerment.

Analysis of DSH-Az's Previous Fundraising

Event Analyses

A core component of empathy-based fundraising is the ability to reflect on and learn from past events. By evaluating the effectiveness and empathy-centered practices of previous fundraisers, Drag Story Hour-Arizona (DSH-Az) can strengthen future events and enhance its impact. This section examines two past fundraisers—the 2020 End of the Year Blow Out (virtual) and the 2024 Birthday Fundraiser: Fighting for the Freedom to Read! (in-person)—using a comprehensive evaluation framework. These events were chosen for analysis due to their significance in DSH-Az's history: the 2020 virtual event marked a shift to digital engagement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while the 2024 in-person event highlighted the ongoing advocacy for the freedom to read in the face of increasing book bans and misinformation, while also being DSH-Az's most successful fundraiser to date. These two events fit into the larger picture of DSH-Az's fundraising efforts by showcasing how the organization has adapted its strategies in response to external challenges and shifting community dynamics.

The evaluation framework used here was developed by synthesizing conventional nonprofit fundraising key performance indicators, while integrating the principles of empathy-based fundraising tailored to DSH-Az's mission and goals. It assesses both:

- **Financial & Administrative Effectiveness:** Financial outcomes, audience engagement, visibility, and partnerships.
- **Empathy-Based Fundraising:** Centering diverse community voices, representation and inclusivity, emotional and community connection, and transparency.

This evaluation incorporates insights from creative pedagogies, such as those practiced by the Drag Story Hour (DSH) initiative, which has employed non-pedantic, imaginative engagement to foster emotional connection and community-building (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020). Additionally, research has demonstrated that live performances can be powerful tools for fostering empathy, shifting attitudes, and encouraging prosocial behavior (Rathje, Hackel, & Zaki, 2021). These findings emphasize the importance of considering how fundraising events engage audiences—not just financially, but also emotionally and socially.

By applying this framework, DSH-Az can identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities for growth in its fundraising strategies.

2020 End of the Year Blow Out (Virtual)

The 2020 End of the Year Blow Out was a virtual fundraiser held during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The event featured drag performances and a virtual story hour, with a raffle hosted on the digital platform Rally Up as the primary fundraising mechanism. The analysis below is based on available DSH-Az records, including event documentation and fundraising data.

Financial & Administrative Effectiveness Evaluation

- **Financial Outcomes:** The event raised \$526, which was a relatively modest amount. With no documented fundraising goal, it is unclear whether the event met expectations, but the low revenue suggests limited financial success.
- **Engagement Level:** Due to the virtual nature of the event and the lack of visual or anecdotal records, the level of audience engagement is unknown. No data is available regarding attendee participation, enthusiasm, or energy.
- **Visibility & Reach:** The event had limited external visibility, with no documented social media activity or media coverage. The lack of online promotion hindered its potential to engage a broader audience.
- **Partnerships & Sponsorships:** The event was supported by moderate community partnerships, including Bookman's, Harley's Toys & Comics, and Witchy Bubble Brews. However, sponsor visibility was minimal—there were no recorded logos or public acknowledgments in event materials.

Empathy-Based Fundraising Evaluation

- **Centering Diverse Voices:** The event successfully centered diverse voices, with drag artists' performances forming the core of the program. This highlighted queer visibility and celebration, despite the event's smaller scale.
- **Representation & Inclusivity:** The performer lineup was diverse, including LGBTQ+ artists.

- **Emotional & Community Connection:** There is insufficient evidence to determine whether the event fostered emotional resonance or meaningful community-building, as no attendee feedback or visuals were available. Research suggests that live performances enhance empathy and promote prosocial behavior (Rathje, Hackel, & Zaki, 2021), which may explain why a virtual format made it more difficult to generate strong audience engagement. Without in-person interaction, attendees may not have formed the same emotional and social connections with the event.
- **Transparency & Trust-Building:** While the donation ask letter mentioned how funds would be used, it is unclear whether this information was communicated during the event itself. The lack of explicit verbal or visual fund-use messaging reduced transparency.

2024 Birthday Fundraiser: Fighting for the Freedom to Read! (In-Person)

The 2024 Birthday Fundraiser marked a significant evolution in DSH-Az's fundraising efforts. This in-person event celebrated five years of Drag Story Hour-Arizona, featuring a drag show hosted by Freddy Prinze Charming and performances by Rita Bane, Justin Cider, Geo Johnson, and Felicia Minor. The event aimed to promote the freedom to read, advocating for access to inclusive and diverse literature, and against the increasing wave of book bans that target LGBTQ+ and other marginalized voices. Funds raised during the event were directed toward DSH-Az's literacy programming, which strives to ensure that all children have access to inclusive and representative stories.

Financial & Administrative Effectiveness Evaluation

- **Financial Outcomes:** The event raised \$3,143, reflecting a substantial improvement over the 2020 fundraiser. Fundraising activities included ticket sales, a raffle that raised \$450, and visible donation prompts during the event.
- **Engagement Level:** With 74 tickets sold, the event achieved high attendance, filling the venue. Audience participation was strong, with lively interactions, enthusiastic responses, and a celebratory atmosphere.
- **Visibility & Reach:** The event had a notable social media presence, with increased engagement on DSH-Az's platforms. The organization used multiple hashtags,

including #DragStoryHour, #DragIsNotACrime, and #TransLivesMatter, which broadened the event’s reach. The online traction indicates successful promotional efforts.

- **Partnerships & Sponsorships:** The fundraiser featured strong community partnerships, with support from Amethyst Rose Massage LLC, Majestic Theater, Brick Road Coffee, AZ Humanities, Free Mom Hugs AZ, and Bearded Gonzo Photography. These partnerships demonstrated local support and solidarity, though sponsor logos were not visibly featured in event materials.

Empathy-Based Fundraising Evaluation

- **Centering Diverse Voices:** The event strongly centered drag artists and LGBTQ+ visibility, with performances as the main attraction. Performers used their platform to celebrate queer identity and promote literacy advocacy. This approach mirrors the overall DSH methodology of non-pedantic engagement, where the focus is less on “teaching” and more on fostering imaginative connections and emotional engagement with the audience (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020).
- **Representation & Inclusivity:** The event featured a diverse lineup of performers, highlighting DSH-Az’s commitment to representation.
- **Emotional & Community Connection:** The fundraiser successfully fostered emotional connections, with visible audience reactions (smiles, laughter, and cheers). Attendees actively engaged with performers, creating a vibrant, communal atmosphere. This was an example of how the event used creative expression to spark *emotional resonance* and forge deeper relationships with the community (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020). Seeing as attending live performances can enhance empathy, change social attitudes, and encourage prosocial behavior (Rathje, Hackel, & Zaki, 2021), by leveraging the immersive nature of live storytelling and drag performances, the event strengthened connections between the audience, performers, and DSH-Az’s mission.
- **Transparency & Trust-Building:** The event clearly communicated how the funds would support DSH-Az’s mission. Transparency was demonstrated through

mentions of fund-use impact in the donation ask letter (i.e. “*raising funds to promote the freedom to read for everyone in Arizona*”), verbal statements by the host during the event, and a background slideshow highlighting how contributions would benefit DSH-Az.

Comparative Findings & Key Takeaways

Financial & Administrative Effectiveness Comparison

Criteria	2020 Blow Out (Virtual)	2024 Birthday Fundraiser (In-Person)
<i>Financial Outcomes</i>	~\$520 raised	~\$3,140 raised
<i>Engagement Level</i>	Unknown (no visual evidence)	Strong (lively, high energy, excited crowd)
<i>Visibility & Reach</i>	Unknown (no social media or media data)	High (strong social media presence & online traction)
<i>Partnership Strength</i>	Moderate (some sponsors, no visual representation)	Strong (multiple sponsors, visible community support)

Empathy-Based Fundraising Comparison

Criteria	2020 Blow Out (Virtual)	2024 Birthday Fundraiser (In-Person)
<i>Diverse Voices</i>	Strong (drag artists central)	Strong (drag performances central, visible celebration)
<i>Representation & Inclusivity</i>	Strong (diverse performers)	Strong (diverse performers)
<i>Emotional & Community Connection</i>	Unknown (no evidence available)	Strong (visible emotional reactions & engagement)
<i>Transparency</i>	Unknown (unclear if fund use was stated clearly)	Clear (explicit mention of fund use & impact)

Key Takeaways

- 1. In-Person vs. Virtual Events – Financial Outcomes & Engagement:** The 2024 Birthday Fundraiser demonstrated how an in-person format can lead to significantly greater financial success (~\$3,140 raised versus ~\$520). The high energy,

excitement, and visible engagement of the audience highlighted the power of live events in creating a memorable, emotionally resonant experience. The in-person nature of the event allowed for direct, interpersonal connections that likely contributed to its success in both emotional engagement and financial outcomes. On the other hand, the 2020 End of the Year Blow Out, held virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic, presents a more complex picture. While the event raised significantly less, the emotional and community connection is also difficult to assess. With no recorded visuals, attendee feedback, or tangible metrics to gauge participation, it is unclear how the virtual format impacted engagement. Research suggests that live performances play a critical role in fostering empathy and prosocial behavior (Rathje et al., 2021), which indicates that while virtual events offer broader accessibility, they face inherent challenges in replicating the emotional engagement and social connections that come naturally with in-person experiences.

- 2. Visibility & Social Media Engagement:** While the 2020 virtual event likely had some level of social media presence, there is no documented evidence or saved posts available for review, making it difficult to assess its reach. The 2024 Birthday Fundraiser, in contrast, had a strong social media presence and media coverage, which was crucial for broadening its visibility and engaging a wider audience. The event's strong online promotion helped foster both virtual and in-person engagement, highlighting the importance of robust online strategies for maximizing reach and participation.
- 3. Challenges of Comparing Virtual & In-Person Fundraisers:** While the comparison offers valuable insights, it's important to note the inherent challenges of evaluating virtual versus in-person events. The different formats—virtual versus live—come with distinct strengths and limitations. Virtual events may struggle to replicate the immediate emotional resonance and community-building that in-person events naturally facilitate. Conversely, virtual formats offer greater accessibility for those unable to attend live events. As such, comparing them requires an understanding of the unique dynamics of each, and future comparisons

should account for these inherent differences to avoid drawing overly broad conclusions about their effectiveness.

- 4. Empathy-Based Fundraising as a Core Strength:** Despite differences in format, both events succeeded in centering diverse voices and promoting inclusivity, which are essential elements of empathy-based fundraising. However, the 2024 in-person event was more effective in fostering emotional connection, a key component of empathy-based fundraising. The visible emotional reactions and community engagement during the event were indicative of its success in connecting attendees with the cause, reinforcing the power of meaningful, community-centered interactions in fundraising.

DSH-Az's fundraisers have significantly grown in effectiveness and empathy. The 2024 Birthday Fundraiser demonstrated how a creative, inclusive approach—rooted in community visibility and centered around advocacy—can lead to stronger emotional engagement and greater financial success. The incorporation of imaginative, non-pedantic pedagogy (Keenan & Hot Mess, 2020), combined with the proven empathy-building effects of live performance (Rathje et al., 2021), proved effective in fostering deep connections between participants and the event's goals.

Survey Data Overview & Analysis

Overview of Survey Responses

Research for this project also focused on developing a survey to explore the audience narratives that could be used to tell the story of why DSH-Az's work matters. The ability to better communicate the impact of DSH-Az's story hours can help counter widespread misinformation about the program. Attendees of DSH-Az's story hours were the target audience for the survey, as the goal was to learn about DSH-Az's impact directly from the community they serve. However, it is important to note a potential limitation in this methodology: by focusing solely on attendees who are already engaged with the program, the survey does not capture perspectives from individuals who may have negative experiences or associations with DSH-Az's story hours. While this may be less relevant to

the current research, it represents an area for further research to understand the broader community's perceptions of the program's impact.

The survey included a combination of open-ended free response, rating scale, and Likert matrix questions to ensure the collection of both qualitative and quantitative response data. Their responses highlight DSH-Az's role in fostering community, empathy, education, and inclusion, while also affirming its significance in promoting diverse storytelling and representation.

The findings align with the principles of *drag pedagogy* described by Keenan and Hot Mess (2020), which emphasizes the playful, imaginative, and empathy-based approach to teaching and learning through drag performances. These performances create inclusive learning environments that invite emotional engagement and imaginative exploration while breaking down normative ideas and encouraging the embrace of difference and diversity. Central to this pedagogy is fostering empathy and creativity through these inclusive practices, and its principles are particularly relevant in the context of DSH-Az's efforts to create emotionally resonant, community-driven experiences.

The responses also align with research on the power of performing arts to enhance empathy and foster prosocial behavior. Rathje, Hackel, and Zaki (2021) found that attending live theater and exposure to performances can cultivate empathy, shift attitudes, and encourage prosocial behavior. This suggests that performances, such as those at DSH-Az's story hours, can have similar effects, fostering community connections and encouraging positive social interactions.

Key Findings

Motivations for Attending Drag Story Hours

Participants were asked to rank the most exciting aspects of story hours, revealing strong enthusiasm for:

- **Diverse and inclusive stories**
 - Ranked #1 by 30.77% of respondents
 - 69.23% ranked it in their top three
- **Quality time with loved ones**

- 53.85% ranked it in their top three
- **Enjoying creative performances**
 - 53.84% ranked it in their top three
- **Connecting with a like-minded community**
 - 46.14% ranked it in their top three

The qualitative responses reinforced these themes. Attendees frequently cited community, acceptance, and fun as their top reasons for participating. Many emphasized the importance of exposing children to diverse perspectives and supporting LGBTQ+ visibility. Themes of joy, nostalgia, and belonging also emerged, indicating that story hours were both a celebratory and educational experience for families.

Notable responses included:

- “My children can enjoy this together with mom, dad, and friends.”
- “The storytelling is great and important to our kids’ learning.”
- “It gives us an opportunity to connect with like-minded friends and neighbors to sing and have fun.”
- “Exposure to diversity for my child, something free and fun to do, and an opportunity to stick it to conservatives.”

These responses not only mirror the goals of *drag pedagogy*, but also showcase how performances can actively cultivate empathy, as shown in both the research and in real-life applications.

Key Takeaways from Story Hours

When asked about their top three takeaways, participants overwhelmingly referenced community-building, empathy, and representation as major impacts of attending.

- **Community & Acceptance:** A majority of responses highlighted that story hours fostered a sense of belonging and a safe space for all attendees, especially LGBTQ+ families.

- **Empathy & Child Development:** Many attendees believed that story hours helped cultivate empathy in children by exposing them to different perspectives. The frequent pairing of child-development-empathy and action-educate-kids in coding suggested that the events encouraged both emotional learning and practical steps to nurture inclusivity in children’s lives.
- **Inspiration & Personal Growth:** Some participants noted that the experience inspired them to become more engaged in community events or advocacy work.

Notable quotes included:

- “The importance of explicitly celebrating diversity for our youth to witness.”
- “Feeling inspired to be more active in the community.”
- “Children love drag and need queer role models in their lives.”
- “These stories inspire so much—even in adults and parents attending.”

These findings underscore how DSH-Az’s events contribute to emotional and developmental growth—a central tenet of *drag pedagogy*’s focus on fostering empathy and creativity. In line with research on the power of performances to cultivate empathy, DSH-Az’s story hours promote emotional development and empathy among participants, particularly children, by exposing them to diverse experiences and perspectives.

Actions Inspired by Story Hours

When attendees were asked what actions they were inspired to take after attending a story hour, the most common responses fell into three categories:

1. Supporting Community Efforts

- Attendees felt encouraged to advocate for LGBTQ+ representation and participate in inclusive community events.
- Some took steps to invite friends and family to future story hours or promote the events online.

2. Normalizing Diversity & Educating Children

- Many responses indicated that participants were inspired to continue conversations about inclusivity at home, particularly through books and storytelling.
- A notable trend was the strong commitment to integrating diversity into children’s lives by normalizing diverse, inclusive experiences and using education as a tool for inclusivity.

3. Queer Representation & Visibility

- Attendees expressed motivation to support LGBTQ+ authors and books and advocate for safe spaces for queer families.
- Some participants also emphasized the role of drag performers as role models in breaking gender norms for children.

Notable quotes included:

- “Teaching my grandson about inclusivity, acceptance, and tolerance.”
- “I share book titles with other parents.”
- “Being more outspoken about important things to me, even if others disagree.”

The call for normalizing diversity and advocating for queer representation directly reflects the goals of *drag pedagogy*. The actions reported by DSH-Az’s attendees, particularly those advocating for diversity and inclusivity, demonstrate how the program’s performances inspire meaningful community engagement and promote inclusive values.

Future Engagement & Advocacy

In addition to the open-ended responses, a Likert matrix question assessed participants’ likelihood of future engagement with DSH-Az. The results showed overwhelmingly positive intentions:

- 92% of respondents said they were likely or very likely to attend another story hour in the future.
- 100% of respondents said they were very likely to recommend story hours to others.

These results strongly indicate that attendees find value in the program and are motivated to continue engaging with DSH-Az. Furthermore, the high likelihood of

recommendation suggests that attendees view story hours as a trusted, beneficial community resource that they want to share with others. The combination of quantitative enthusiasm and qualitative reflections reinforces the idea that DSH-Az's programming fosters deep, lasting connections within the community, similar to the effects observed in research on live performances and their role in strengthening social bonds and encouraging future engagement.

Building on this momentum, DSH-Az could consider ways to not only engage attendees as supporters but also as active fundraisers. Motivating those who already feel deeply connected to the organization's mission could provide a sustainable way to grow fundraising capacity. This could include empowering attendees to host their own fundraising events, participate in peer-to-peer campaigns, or simply spread awareness of the cause among their networks. Such efforts could complement DSH-Az's existing donor base and further strengthen the community's investment in the organization's long-term success.

Implications for Fundraising & Community Engagement

The survey responses revealed compelling narratives that can be leveraged in fundraising efforts for DSH-Az. Attendees described the events in emotionally resonant ways, emphasizing themes of belonging, joy, and learning. These insights suggest several strategies for an empathy-based, community-centered fundraising approach:

- **Storytelling as a Fundraising Tool:** Personal testimonials from attendees can be incorporated into donor communications to highlight DSH-Az's impact.
- **Emphasizing Family & Community:** Since many respondents valued family-friendly activities and safe spaces, fundraising appeals should reinforce DSH-Az's role in fostering intergenerational connection and community support.
- **Advocacy-Driven Engagement:** The data suggested a strong connection between participation in story hours and increased advocacy for LGBTQ+ inclusion. Calls to action in fundraising campaigns should encourage donors to see themselves as supporters of social change through their contributions.

Overall, the survey findings confirmed that DSH-Az's story hours had a meaningful and lasting impact on attendees. From creating safe, inclusive spaces to fostering empathy and community engagement, the events resonated deeply with participants. By centering these themes in its fundraising strategy, DSH-Az can strengthen donor connections, highlight the tangible benefits of its programming, and further its mission of promoting diverse, inclusive storytelling for all families.

Planning an Empathy-Based, Community-Centered Fundraising Event

Empathy-based, community-centered fundraising events are designed to prioritize relationship-building, ethical storytelling, and genuine community engagement over transactional donor interactions. By centering the needs, voices, and experiences of the community being served, these events foster deeper trust, meaningful participation, and sustainable financial support. This section outlines key steps for planning empathy-based events, including setting clear goals, engaging the community authentically, and crafting empathy-driven appeals.

Setting Goals

Empathy-based fundraising begins with intention-driven goal setting, where financial outcomes are balanced with relational, community, and mission-oriented objectives. Effective goals in this context prioritize both financial sustainability and community impact, ensuring that success is not measured by revenue alone but also by the event's capacity to strengthen relationships, amplify voices, and deepen public awareness.

Prioritizing Impact With Revenue

Traditional fundraising often centers on revenue generation as the primary measure of success. However, empathy-based events equally value community participation, visibility, and trust-building.

- **Dual Goal Setting:** Establish both financial and non-financial goals. For example:
 - Financial Goal: Raise \$5,000.
 - Relational Goal: Increase donor retention by fostering deeper connections with attendees.
- **Mission-Aligned Metrics:** Set success metrics that go beyond profit, such as:
 - Number of community members engaged (e.g., volunteers, attendees, social media interactions).

- Attendee feedback and testimonials on their sense of connection and understanding.
- Increased community visibility (e.g., media mentions, social shares).

When setting goals, financial success should complement—not overshadow—community-centered impact.

Building Accountability into Goals

Empathy-based fundraising goals should include mechanisms for transparency and accountability.

- **Clear Use of Funds:** Clearly define how the funds will be used and communicate this both before and during the event. For example, stating: “Every \$100 raised supports one inclusive literacy program for underserved youth.”
- **Community-Centered Reporting:** Share post-event updates that detail how the funds were allocated and the tangible impact on the community.

Engaging the Community

Empathy-based fundraising requires deep community participation at every stage of the event—from planning and promotion to execution and follow-up. This means shifting from a donor-centric model to one where the community’s voice, presence, and leadership are at the forefront. Donors, as part of the broader community, should be viewed not as separate entities but as active participants in this process, contributing their resources while also engaging in shared experiences, learning from community members, and fostering relationships built on solidarity rather than transaction. By involving the community as active participants, not just passive recipients or fundraising targets, nonprofits build authentic connections and foster shared ownership.

Authentic Community Involvement

Rather than planning events in isolation, nonprofits should collaborate with the people they serve – the most effective fundraising events are co-created with the community.

- **Engage the Community Early:** Gather input from community members through listening sessions, surveys, or focus groups to understand their values and priorities.
- **Collaborative Planning & Co-Creation:** Involve local leaders, grassroots organizers, and directly impacted individuals in goal-setting and event planning. Ensure that the event not only reflects the community's needs, cultural diversity, and accessibility requirements, but also resonates with the community by incorporating their voices throughout the process.
- **Community-Driven Programming:** Feature local artists, activists, and storytellers as speakers or performers. This ensures the event reflects and celebrates the community's diversity.

Prioritizing Accessibility & Inclusion

Empathy-based events should be welcoming and accessible to all, regardless of background or ability.

- **Accessible Event Design:** Ensure that the venue or platform is physically and digitally accessible, including ASL interpreters or live captioning, when able, gender-neutral bathrooms, and pronoun badges or name tags. This ensures that all individuals can fully participate.
- **Cultural Representation:** Reflect the diversity of the community through inclusive language and visuals in promotional materials, as well as performers, speakers, and vendors from diverse identities and lived experiences.

Building Genuine Connections During the Event

Empathy-based fundraising events should prioritize relational experiences over transactional interactions.

- **Interactive Activities:** Rather than relying on passive programming, activities like community art projects, story-sharing circles, and hands-on workshops or learning experiences encourage dialogue and shared experiences.

- **Space for Authentic Connection:** Building in opportunities for casual mingling also creates space for meaningful conversations between staff, beneficiaries, and supporters, strengthening personal connections and fostering a sense of belonging.

Creating Empathy-Driven Appeals

Empathy-driven appeals focus on authentic storytelling, ethical representation, and community voices. They frame fundraising not as a plea for charity but as an opportunity for solidarity and shared impact.

Storytelling with Dignity & Strength

Effective appeals feature authentic, first-person narratives that uplift the voices of those impacted by the cause.

- **Centering Community Narratives:** Use personal testimonials, video stories, or live speeches to highlight the experiences, strengths, and leadership of the community. For example, instead of sharing statistics alone, feature direct narratives from program participants, volunteers, or organizers.
- **Strengths-Based Framing:** Avoid deficit-based language (e.g. “at-risk” or “helpless”) and instead emphasize community resilience, grassroots solutions, and collaborative efforts.

Humanizing the Cause Through Visuals

Visual storytelling plays a powerful role in evoking empathy without exploitation.

- **Authentic imagery:** Eye-level photography and candid moments that capture genuine emotions and experiences. such as smiles, laughter, or moments of connection, can make the cause feel personal and relatable.
- **Inclusive Representation:** Care should be taken to ensure that visuals reflect the diversity of the community being served, celebrating their identities and agency without resorting to pity-based imagery.

Framing Contributions as Acts of Solidarity

The language of empathy-based appeals frames giving as a shared investment rather than a charitable favor.

- **Inclusive and Empowering Language:** Instead of positioning donors as saviors, the messaging should frame contributions as acts of solidarity and shared investment. For instance, using language like “Join us in sustaining inclusive literacy programs” or “Your support strengthens community-led solutions” conveys a sense of collective action. This approach invites donors to become partners in the mission rather than benefactors performing charity.
- **Relational Messaging:** Instead of focusing on one-time gifts, emphasize long-term support and shared ownership, such as through membership models where donors become active participants, or invitations to volunteer or attend future events to continue building relationships.

Transparency & Accountability in Appeals

Empathy-driven appeals clearly communicate how contributions will be used, fostering trust and accountability.

- **Concrete Impact Statements:** Including concrete impact statements, such as “A \$50 donation provides three families with free literacy kits,” makes the appeal tangible and trustworthy.
- **Ongoing Communication:** Include a commitment to regular impact updates, reassuring donors that their support makes a difference. Throughout the event, transparency can be reinforced through live mentions of fundraising progress, background slides showing the nonprofit’s work, or testimonials from staff and community members. Post-event impact reports can further strengthen donor trust and demonstrate accountability.

Designing the Event Experience

Designing an empathy-based, community-centered fundraising event requires thoughtful planning, execution, and follow-up to ensure the experience reflects the organization’s mission and values. Every stage, from pre-event planning to post-event reflection, should prioritize community representation, inclusivity, and meaningful engagement. While this section focuses on event design, it’s important to note that these frameworks and strategies—such as crafting authentic community engagement and

transparent communication—are equally applicable to other fundraising formats, including appeal letters, social media campaigns, and more. This section outlines strategies for crafting a cohesive and impactful event experience, including pre-event preparation, day-of execution, and post-event evaluation.

Pre-Event: Laying the Foundation

Effective event planning begins with careful consideration of content, logistics, and promotion. Every element should be intentionally designed to center the community, foster meaningful connections, and align with empathy-based principles.

Curating the Event Program

The program is the heart of the event experience, shaping the narrative, emotional tone, and overall impact. To foster empathy and connection, the program should include authentic community voices, such as drag artists, storytellers, or individuals directly impacted by the cause. When selecting speakers or performers, it is essential to prioritize diversity and representation, ensuring that the lineup reflects the identities and experiences of the communities served.

Incorporating personal testimonials, storytelling performances, and interactive segments creates moments of emotional resonance. For example, a literacy fundraiser could feature a drag performer reading a children’s book that highlights diverse identities, followed by a personal reflection on the importance of inclusive representation. A balance of entertainment, mission-centered content, and calls to action keeps the program engaging and impactful.

Choosing the Venue

The venue plays a critical role in ensuring the event is inclusive, accessible, and safe. Selecting the right location requires careful consideration of accessibility, transportation options, ambiance, and capacity to create a welcoming and comfortable environment for all attendees. Whether the event is in-person or virtual, the venue should reflect the nonprofit’s values of empathy, inclusivity, and community-centeredness.

- **Accessibility:** Prioritizing accessibility is essential for creating an event that is welcoming and inclusive for all participants.

- For **in-person events**, this means ensuring that the venue complies with ADA standards and accommodates a range of needs. The venue should have step-free entry, ramps, and accessible seating areas to ensure all attendees can move freely, and a staff member should verify that elevators, if needed, are functional and properly marked. Look for venues with gender-neutral bathrooms and ensure that facilities are accessible for individuals with disabilities. Gender-neutral bathrooms foster inclusivity for transgender and nonbinary attendees, while accessible restrooms accommodate mobility needs. Ensure that large, easy-to-read signage with visual and text-based directions can be displayed—for larger venues, consider offering printed maps or providing staff to guide attendees. For neurodivergent attendees, create quiet spaces or sensory-friendly zones to offer reprieve from potentially overwhelming noise or activity.
- For **virtual events**, real-time captions and post-event transcripts can make content accessible to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Ensuring the virtual platform is compatible with screen readers and assistive technologies helps accommodate attendees with visual impairments. It's best practice to choose intuitive, easy-to-navigate virtual platforms with minimal technical barriers—include clear instructions for accessing the event and provide tech support during the event to assist with accessibility issues.
- **Location & Transportation:** Selecting a venue with convenient transportation options ensures that the event is accessible to a broader audience. Select venues that are near public transportation hubs, such as bus or light rail stations, to accommodate attendees without personal vehicles, and include directions, transit schedules, and stop locations in event promotions. Ensure that the venue has sufficient parking availability or nearby parking garages—for larger events, consider offering valet or shuttle services to ease transportation challenges. Include clear instructions for parking, including ADA-accessible spaces. If feasible, explore partnerships with ride-share services to offer discounted rides to and from the event, making transportation more accessible.

- For **virtual events**, accessibility to reliable Wi-Fi and user-friendly access links is key. Share clear, detailed instructions in advance, and offer tech support during the event to assist attendees who encounter connectivity issues.
- **Ambiance & Capacity:** The ambiance of the venue should reflect the tone and purpose of the event, creating a welcoming and engaging environment. Ensure the venue comfortably accommodates the anticipated number of attendees while allowing for free movement and interaction. Overcrowded spaces can detract from the experience, while underfilled venues may feel disconnected. Choose a space that provides seating flexibility and comfortable gathering areas. The venue's ambiance should align with the event's empathy-based, community-centered goals. For example, if the event celebrates drag artistry, opt for creative, expressive decor that reflects LGBTQ+ pride and culture. Use inclusive signage, artwork, and visuals to make attendees feel represented. Ensure the venue has adequate lighting and sound systems. Poor lighting or acoustics can alienate attendees with visual or hearing impairments. Test microphones and speakers in advance to confirm sound quality. If hosting an outdoor event, account for weather contingencies (e.g., tents, shaded areas) and provide accessible restroom and seating options. For hybrid events, confirm that the virtual stream offers high-quality audio and visual experiences for remote attendees.
 - For virtual events, ambiance includes visual design elements (e.g., branded event backgrounds), user-friendly platform navigation, and interactive features, such as live polls or Q&A sessions, to maintain audience engagement.

Funding the Event

Empathy-based events require thoughtful financial planning to balance affordability with revenue generation. This involves:

- **Budgeting:** Creating a detailed and realistic budget is essential for executing a successful empathy-based fundraising event. The budgeting process should outline all anticipated expenses, including venue rental, performer fees, catering,

promotional materials, event decor, and staffing costs. Prioritizing fair compensation for community performers, staff, and service providers is crucial—nonprofits should avoid exploitative “exposure-only” arrangements, which undervalue the labor of artists and marginalized groups. Instead, allocate funds to ensure that performers, particularly those from underrepresented communities, receive equitable pay.

Additionally, build in a contingency fund to accommodate unexpected expenses, such as last-minute technical needs or additional accessibility services.

Transparency is key—clearly document how expenses align with the event’s mission and fundraising goals, ensuring that the majority of funds raised directly support the nonprofit’s programs rather than excessive overhead costs.

- **Sponsorships & Donations:** Securing mission-aligned sponsors is a strategic way to offset event costs and enhance financial outcomes. Seek sponsorships from local LGBTQ+ businesses, community organizations, and values-aligned companies that authentically support the nonprofit’s mission. Sponsorship agreements should be based on equitable partnerships rather than purely corporate promotion—prioritizing shared values and community impact over profit-driven branding. For example, sponsors can fund specific event elements (e.g., covering performer fees or providing catering) in exchange for modest but meaningful recognition, such as event signage or program mentions. To maintain authenticity, avoid sponsorship deals that could dilute the event’s empathy-centered message or compromise the nonprofit’s values. Additionally, offer tiered sponsorship packages that allow organizations of different sizes to contribute, fostering more inclusive partnership opportunities.
- **In-Kind Contributions:** In-kind donations, such as donated venue space, catering services, or auction items, significantly reduce event expenses while building meaningful community partnerships. Reach out to local businesses, restaurants, and artists that support the nonprofit’s mission, encouraging them to contribute services or products. In-kind contributions not only cut costs but also showcase local talent and businesses, strengthening ties between the organization and its community. When soliciting in-kind support, clearly communicate the event’s purpose and

potential visibility for contributors, highlighting how their generosity supports a meaningful cause. In-kind donors should be appropriately recognized during the event—through verbal acknowledgments, signage, or inclusion in event programs—ensuring their contributions are valued and appreciated.

Planning for Event Revenue

To maximize financial sustainability without compromising accessibility, nonprofits should offer diverse revenue streams. This could include:

- **Ticket Sales:** Establishing accessible yet impactful pricing is key to balancing affordability with revenue generation. Setting reasonable ticket prices that reflect the event's value while remaining financially accessible encourages broader participation. Offering early-bird discounts, group rates, or VIP packages can incentivize early purchases and maximize ticket sales. Clearly communicating how ticket revenue supports the organization's mission helps attendees feel more connected to their contribution.
- **Raffles & Auctions:** Incorporating raffles and auctions into the event can significantly boost fundraising revenue while creating interactive and engaging experiences. For raffles, offering a variety of prize tiers—ranging from smaller, crowd-pleasing items (e.g., gift cards, local business vouchers) to larger, high-value prizes (e.g., event tickets, vacation packages)—encourages broader participation. For auctions, consider a mix of silent and live bidding to accommodate different preferences and budgets. Curate items that are meaningful and relevant to the community, such as artwork by local LGBTQ+ artists, exclusive experiences with drag performers, or themed gift baskets. To maximize revenue, promote auction and raffle items in advance through social media previews and event teasers, building anticipation
- **Donation Drives:** Incorporating real-time fundraising appeals during the event creates powerful, immediate giving opportunities. To maximize impact, use multiple donation methods to accommodate different preferences, such as QR codes on tables, text-to-give options, or mobile payment platforms. Display clear, visible signage with simple instructions for quick and easy donations, ensuring accessibility

for all attendees. During key moments of the event—such as emotionally resonant performances or personal testimonials—integrate live donation asks, where the host or performers directly appeal to the audience, sharing compelling stories about the impact of their contributions. To create a sense of urgency and collective momentum, consider tracking live donation progress on a visual thermometer or screen, allowing attendees to see their collective impact in real time. Additionally, offering matching gift challenges or donor pledges during the event can further incentivize giving, doubling the financial impact and encouraging larger contributions.

Promoting the Event

Empathy-based event promotion focuses on building authentic connections with the community, rather than relying solely on broad donor outreach. This involves:

- **Storytelling-Driven Marketing:** Storytelling-driven marketing is a powerful tool for creating authentic, emotionally resonant promotional content. By featuring community voices, quotes, and testimonials, nonprofits can humanize their cause and foster a deeper connection with potential attendees. This approach puts real experiences at the forefront, making the event’s mission more relatable and compelling. For example, a short video testimonial from a drag artist explaining how DSH-Az’s events provide a safe space for self-expression personalizes the cause. Similarly, a participant in the literacy program could share how access to inclusive books gave them a sense of belonging, helping audiences understand the tangible impact of the nonprofit’s work. By amplifying these real-life experiences, the promotional content becomes more authentic and emotionally engaging, inspiring potential attendees to support the event not just as donors, but as invested community members.
- **Consistent Branding:** Maintaining consistent branding across all promotional materials is essential for building recognition and reinforcing the nonprofit’s visual identity. A cohesive and recognizable aesthetic helps potential attendees quickly identify and connect with the event, boosting familiarity and trust. To achieve this, nonprofits should create branded templates for social media posts, emails, and

physical flyers. These templates should incorporate consistent colors, fonts, logos, and visual elements that align with the organization's existing brand. For instance, using DSH-Az's signature colors and logo on every event post creates visual continuity, making the content instantly recognizable. Additionally, ensuring that the tone and messaging are consistent across platforms—whether in social media captions, email blasts, or press releases—enhances credibility and reinforces the event's theme and mission.

- **Inclusive Language & Imagery:** Using inclusive language and diverse imagery in promotional content is critical for reflecting the values of empathy-based fundraising. Inclusive marketing ensures that all community members feel represented, respected, and welcomed, fostering greater connection and trust. Promotional materials should feature gender-inclusive language (e.g., using “they/them” pronouns by default or offering multiple gender options in registration forms) and celebrate diverse identities. This includes showcasing a range of performers, speakers, and community members in promotional photos and graphics. For example, highlighting BIPOC, trans, and nonbinary performers in visuals demonstrates a commitment to representation and inclusion. Additionally, avoiding exploitative or pity-based messaging is essential. Instead of framing the community as passive recipients of aid, language should emphasize agency, strength, and empowerment, conveying a narrative of solidarity rather than saviorism.
- **Hashtag & Social Media Strategy:** An effective hashtag and social media strategy can significantly amplify the event's reach and boost engagement. Developing event-specific hashtags makes it easier for attendees to share posts, creates a digital footprint, and encourages online conversations. For example, a custom hashtag like #DragForLiteracy or #ReadWithPride links all event-related posts together, making them easy to find and share. During the event promotion phase, nonprofits can encourage attendees, performers, and sponsors to use the hashtag, expanding the event's visibility beyond the organization's own network. Additionally, frequent and strategic social media posts featuring countdowns, behind-the-scenes content, and interactive polls help build anticipation and sustain interest. Partnering with local

influencers or LGBTQ+ community pages to share event content further increases the event's reach and attracts a broader audience.

Ensuring Safety & Security

For LGBTQ+ events, ensuring safety and security is paramount due to the heightened risk of targeted harassment, disruption, or discrimination. Thoughtful pre-event safety planning not only protects attendees but also fosters an environment of trust, comfort, and inclusivity, allowing guests to fully engage with the event. A comprehensive security strategy should include proactive risk management, trained staff, and privacy considerations to promote a safe and welcoming experience.

- **Venue Security:** Partnering with LGBTQ+ affirming security teams (for example, coordinating with the Phoenix Police Department's Community Engagement Bureau and/or LGBTQ+ Advisory Board to hire LGBTQ+ affirming off-duty police officers as security) or community-based safety groups is essential for ensuring both protection and inclusivity. Unlike traditional security teams, which may unintentionally make marginalized attendees feel unsafe, LGBTQ+ affirming security professionals are often trained in de-escalation techniques and sensitive to the unique needs of queer and trans communities. Nonprofits can also collaborate with local organizations specializing in community safety, such as mutual aid groups or bystander intervention collectives, to provide protection with a values-aligned approach. For example, having visible but approachable security staff at entry points and throughout the venue can deter potential threats while ensuring attendees feel supported rather than policed. Additionally, establishing emergency response protocols (e.g., clear evacuation plans and communication channels) ensures the event is prepared for unexpected incidents.
- **Staff & Volunteer Training:** Properly preparing event staff and volunteers is crucial for promoting safety, preventing conflicts, and responding to incidents with care and empathy. All staff should receive de-escalation and bystander intervention training (like [this bystander training](#) by Right To Be), equipping them with the skills needed to manage disruptions calmly and compassionately. Training should cover conflict resolution techniques, how to recognize and respond to microaggressions, and steps

for addressing discriminatory behavior. Additionally, staff should be trained on cultural sensitivity and LGBTQ+ allyship (using something like [this foundational LGBTQ+ understanding training](#) by The Safe Project), ensuring they create an affirming environment for all attendees. For example, having designated “safe staff” with visible markers (such as pins or lanyards) signals to attendees that there are trusted individuals they can approach with concerns or for support. This creates a layer of security rooted in community care rather than solely relying on law enforcement or external security forces.

- **Clear Safety Protocols:** Establishing clear and equitable safety protocols is essential for protecting attendees while avoiding exclusionary or invasive practices. Safety measures such as ID checks, bag inspections, and crowd management should be conducted with dignity and sensitivity, prioritizing attendee comfort and privacy. For instance, gender-affirming ID checks should be implemented in a way that respects trans and nonbinary attendees. Staff can be trained to accept names or pronouns that may not match legal IDs and to avoid misgendering or invasive questioning. Additionally, creating clear signage outlining safety protocols (e.g., rules regarding photography, alcohol service, or accessibility measures) helps attendees feel informed and secure without confusion or discomfort. When planning larger events, nonprofits can also consider crowd management strategies that promote accessibility, such as creating quiet or low-sensory areas for neurodivergent attendees and providing clear pathways to avoid congestion.
- **Privacy Considerations:** Prioritizing attendee privacy and consent is essential for protecting individuals’ safety, particularly in LGBTQ+ events where attendees may be vulnerable to doxxing, outing, or harassment. Providing options for opting out of event photos, videos, or social media tagging ensures that attendees can participate comfortably without fear of being publicly identified. For example, events can offer color-coded wristbands or stickers to indicate photo preferences (e.g., green = comfortable with photos, red = no photos). This system allows photographers and fellow attendees to easily respect privacy boundaries. Additionally, ensuring that social media posts avoid identifying or tagging individuals without consent

safeguards attendees' confidentiality. Nonprofits should also consider secure data handling practices for registration or ticketing information, ensuring that personal information is protected and not shared without consent. By prioritizing privacy, the organization creates a safer and more affirming environment, fostering trust and inclusivity throughout the event.

During the Event: Execution with Empathy

The day of the event is the culmination of the meticulous planning process, where every detail comes together to create a meaningful and memorable experience. This stage requires seamless coordination, clear communication, and thoughtful execution to ensure the event runs smoothly and fulfills its intended purpose. From the moment guests arrive to the closing remarks, every touchpoint should reflect the values of empathy, inclusivity, and transparency. An empathy-based fundraising event goes beyond logistics—it is an opportunity to build trust, foster genuine connections, and inspire support through authentic storytelling and meaningful interactions. The day-of experience should immerse attendees in the organization's mission, leaving them with a deeper understanding of its impact and a sense of shared purpose. Thoughtful programming, engaging activities, and well-prepared staff all contribute to creating an event that not only raises funds but also strengthens community bonds and advances the organization's mission.

Guest Entry & Registration

The entry process sets the tone for the entire event, making it essential to prioritize efficiency, accessibility, and hospitality. A smooth and welcoming check-in experience not only ensures that the event begins on a positive note but also reflects the organization's commitment to inclusivity and care. A well-managed entry process makes attendees feel valued and comfortable, creating an atmosphere of trust and connection from the very start.

- **Streamlined Check-In:** A well-organized check-in process reduces wait times and prevents bottlenecks, contributing to a stress-free and enjoyable arrival. Offering pre-registration options allows guests to sign up in advance, while using QR code check-ins or digital ticketing speeds up the entry process (for example, platforms like [Eventbrite](#) offer QR code check-ins and digital ticketing solutions to streamline

check-in). Having multiple entry points can prevent crowding, making the experience more efficient, especially for larger events. For smaller or more intimate gatherings, personalized, manual check-ins with name badges can add a thoughtful touch.

- **Warm Welcome:** The entry experience should be more than just a logistical formality—it's an opportunity to set the tone of empathy and hospitality. Staff and volunteers should be trained to offer genuine, personalized greetings, making eye contact and using welcoming language to create a friendly atmosphere. Small touches, like offering refreshments at the entrance or providing welcome cards with key event information, can make guests feel immediately appreciated and comfortable.
- **Accessibility Considerations:** Ensuring that the entry process is inclusive and accommodating is essential for fostering empathy and making all attendees feel welcome. This includes providing accessible entry points with ramps or elevators for wheelchair users, clearly marked signage, and spacious registration desks. For individuals with sensory sensitivities, having a quiet check-in area or offering noise-cancelling headphones can make the arrival experience more comfortable. Additionally, using large, easy-to-read fonts on signage and providing multilingual or ASL interpretation support ensures that the event is accessible to a broader audience.

Raffle & Auction Management

Raffles and auctions are powerful fundraising tools that can boost revenue and engagement while offering attendees an interactive and enjoyable experience. When designed with clarity, empathy, and mission alignment, they can also strengthen the emotional connection between donors and the cause. To achieve this, it's essential to prioritize clear communication, meaningful item selection, and transparency about how the funds will directly support the organization's mission. This approach fosters trust, enthusiasm, and a sense of shared purpose among attendees.

- **Clear Instructions:** Transparency and ease of participation are key to building trust and encouraging involvement in raffles and auctions. Displaying clear and accessible

instructions ensures that attendees understand the rules, pricing, and procedures. Raffle signage should include ticket costs, purchasing locations, and prize details, while auctions should outline bidding increments, closing times, and payment processes. For larger events, having staff or volunteers available to answer questions can prevent confusion. Clear communication not only streamlines the experience but also reduces potential frustration, creating a seamless and enjoyable participation process.

- **Empathy-Centric Auction Items:** The items featured in raffles and auctions should reflect the values and interests of the community being served, rather than focusing solely on high-value or luxury goods. Thoughtfully curated items can create meaningful connections to the cause, making the fundraising effort feel more mission-driven. For example, featuring local art, handmade crafts, or experiences from community members highlights and celebrates their creativity while promoting local talent. Including service-based items, such as donated consulting hours, wellness sessions, or community experiences, adds variety and relevance. By offering items with cultural, personal, or sentimental significance, nonprofits can foster a sense of shared identity and purpose among attendees.
- **Transparency in Impact:** Raffles and auctions present an excellent opportunity to reinforce the direct impact of donations. During bidding or ticket sales, staff or emcees should regularly emphasize how the proceeds will benefit the community. For example, an auctioneer might say, “Your bid directly funds our free literacy programs for local children,” or raffle ticket sellers could highlight that “Every ticket purchased helps us provide more inclusive, educational events.” Visual aids, such as impact slides or signage, can further demonstrate where the funds will go, building trust and donor confidence. Sharing specific outcomes—like how many individuals will be served or what new programs will be funded—makes the donation’s value tangible, creating a more compelling and emotionally resonant giving experience.

Food & Drink Management

Food and beverage service is more than just a logistical detail—it is an opportunity to enhance the overall guest experience, foster connections, and reinforce the

organization's values. Thoughtful planning around food and drink creates a welcoming and inclusive environment, making attendees feel considered and cared for. Additionally, incorporating local partnerships and culturally relevant offerings can deepen the event's connection to the community and reflect its values. Clear service flow and accessibility ensure that all guests can enjoy the refreshments with ease, contributing to a positive and memorable experience.

- **Accessible Options:** Offering a variety of food and drink choices that accommodate diverse dietary needs demonstrates empathy and inclusivity. By including vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, and allergy-friendly options, nonprofits ensure that all attendees feel respected and welcome, regardless of their dietary restrictions. Clearly labeling food items and providing detailed ingredient lists helps guests make informed choices and prevents potential allergic reactions. Additionally, offering non-alcoholic beverage options ensures that guests who do not drink alcohol—whether for personal, cultural, or health reasons—can fully participate in the social aspects of the event. Prioritizing accessibility in food and beverage service creates a more equitable and considerate atmosphere, reinforcing the organization's commitment to inclusion.
- **Local Partnerships:** Collaborating with local, LGBTQ+-, BIPOC-, or women-owned businesses for food and beverage service strengthens the event's community-centered approach (Local First Arizona makes it easy to find these businesses with [their directory](#)). By sourcing from local vendors, nonprofits support small businesses and reflect their values of equity and solidarity. For example, featuring desserts from a local LGBTQ+ bakery or beverages from a BIPOC-owned brewery showcases community talent and entrepreneurship, while keeping event spending local. Highlighting these partnerships during the event—through signage, shout-outs, or mentions in the program—further emphasizes the organization's commitment to authentic community support. Partnering with businesses that align with the nonprofit's mission also fosters meaningful connections and offers attendees the chance to support these enterprises beyond the event.

- **Clear Service Flow:** Smooth and efficient food and drink service is essential for maintaining guest satisfaction and event flow. Organizing clearly marked stations and ensuring staff or volunteers are available to guide attendees reduces confusion and prevents bottlenecks. For larger events, spreading out food and drink stations around the venue can prevent overcrowding and make service lines more manageable. Strategically placing beverage stations near social areas encourages mingling, while food stations placed near seating areas create comfortable spaces for guests to eat and converse. Staff should also be prepared to assist guests with mobility needs to ensure equitable access to refreshments. Clear, organized service flow contributes to a positive and seamless guest experience, allowing attendees to focus on enjoying the event and connecting with others.

Program Execution

A well-executed event program is the heartbeat of a successful empathy-based fundraiser. It not only sets the tone for the event but also immerses attendees in the organization's mission, creating emotional connections that inspire support. The program should be carefully crafted to maintain a steady flow, captivate attention, and evoke empathy, all while delivering key messages about the nonprofit's impact. Thoughtful sequencing of performances, speeches, and fundraising moments ensures that the event is both emotionally resonant and logistically seamless. By weaving in storytelling, interactive moments, and clear calls to action, the program becomes a powerful vehicle for fostering empathy and driving meaningful engagement.

- **Intentional Transitions:** Thoughtful transitions between performances, speeches, and activities are essential for maintaining the event's momentum and emotional energy. Abrupt or poorly timed shifts can disrupt the flow, while smooth, purposeful transitions keep attendees engaged and emotionally connected. For example, moving from a moving personal testimonial into a musical performance without interruption can sustain the emotional resonance, while a brief host commentary can provide context and frame the next segment. Using consistent, intentional cues, such as themed music or brief interstitial videos, can guide attendees through the

program without losing their attention. Seamless transitions enhance the overall experience, making the event feel polished and professionally executed.

- **Mission Moments:** Weaving mission-driven content throughout the program ensures that the event remains deeply tied to the cause. These moments create emotional touchpoints that humanize the nonprofit's work and highlight its impact. Incorporating impact stories, personal testimonials, or short documentary-style videos allows attendees to hear directly from those benefiting from or contributing to the cause. Additionally, real-time appeals that emphasize how donations make a difference (e.g., "Your \$50 donation funds one literacy program for LGBTQ+ youth") reinforce the event's purpose. By strategically placing mission moments at key points—such as before an auction or fundraising ask—nonprofits can evoke empathy and inspire attendees to give more generously.
- **Real-Time Engagement:** Keeping the audience actively involved throughout the program enhances participation and strengthens connections. Real-time engagement can include live social media interaction, encouraging attendees to share photos or event highlights using a specific hashtag. Displaying a live donation tracker or goal thermometer creates excitement and motivates attendees to contribute. Additionally, incorporating interactive elements, such as audience Q&A sessions with performers or speakers, fosters connection and makes attendees feel more involved in the event's narrative. Real-time engagement keeps the energy high and makes attendees feel like active participants rather than passive observers, boosting both emotional investment and fundraising outcomes.

Staff Coordination & Day-of Plan

A well-coordinated staff and detailed day-of plan are essential for the smooth execution of an empathy-based fundraiser. Effective staff coordination ensures that all logistical and guest experience elements are executed efficiently and professionally, while also prioritizing empathy and hospitality. Staff and volunteers are the face of the event, playing a pivotal role in creating a welcoming, organized, and mission-centered atmosphere. A thorough day-of plan covers registration, guest services, technical logistics, and contingency strategies, ensuring that any unforeseen issues are managed seamlessly.

Equipping staff with empathy-focused training helps foster an environment where guests feel respected, supported, and valued throughout the event.

- **Staff Roles & Responsibilities:** Clearly defined staff roles and responsibilities are essential for maintaining order and efficiency throughout the event. Assigning specific tasks to dedicated team members ensures that registration, guest services, and technical operations run smoothly. For example, designating greeters at the entrance to welcome guests warmly sets a positive tone, while having tech-savvy staff on standby ensures rapid troubleshooting of audiovisual issues. Staff managing food and beverage stations should be informed about dietary options to provide accurate information to guests. Providing role-specific checklists and scheduling pre-event run-throughs guarantees that all team members are aligned and confident in their responsibilities, resulting in a cohesive and polished event experience.
- **Contingency Planning:** Preparing for unexpected challenges or disruptions is essential to prevent minor issues from derailing the event. Contingency planning should cover technical difficulties, last-minute program changes, and safety concerns. For example, having a backup microphone or audiovisual technician on-site can prevent delays if equipment malfunctions. In the case of outdoor events, planning for inclement weather with backup tents or indoor alternatives ensures continuity. Staff should be briefed on emergency protocols and empowered to make quick decisions in the event of unexpected issues. Proactive contingency planning ensures that any challenges are handled swiftly and discreetly, minimizing their impact on the guest experience.
- **Empathy-Driven Staff Conduct:** Training staff to lead with empathy enhances the overall guest experience and reinforces the event's mission. Staff should be trained to prioritize guest comfort and accessibility, ensuring that attendees feel welcome and respected. This includes greeting guests warmly, accommodating accessibility needs (e.g., assisting attendees with mobility devices), and responding promptly to concerns with kindness and professionalism. For example, if a guest expresses a dietary restriction, staff should be prepared to address it sensitively and efficiently. Staff should also be encouraged to engage with guests authentically, fostering a

sense of community and connection. Empathy-driven staff conduct creates a positive and memorable experience, making attendees feel valued and more likely to support the organization in the future.

Volunteer Engagement & Inclusion

Volunteers play a crucial role in the success of an empathy-based fundraiser, offering valuable support while also contributing to the event's inclusive, community-centered atmosphere. By providing volunteer opportunities, organizations can invite people who may not have the financial means to attend as guests to engage with the event in a meaningful way. This helps broaden access and creates a sense of ownership and investment in the event and its mission.

While volunteers help create a more inclusive experience, it's essential to recognize the potential for problematic divides that may arise. For example, the need for volunteers might unintentionally perpetuate class disparities, with those who cannot afford a ticket or donation being asked to "work" rather than fully participating as guests. To mitigate this, nonprofits should strive for a balanced approach, offering clear and equitable volunteer roles that ensure volunteers have a positive, valued experience, not just as workers but as active participants in the event's success.

Suggestions for equity-based volunteer engagement include:

- **Creating Volunteer Ticket Programs:** To ensure that volunteer opportunities remain accessible to those who may not have the financial means to attend, organizations can create a volunteer ticket program. This program could involve offering volunteers the chance to attend the event either before or after their shift is completed, ensuring they have a full experience as both participants and contributors. Alternatively, an accessible volunteer package can be established, where volunteers receive event tickets or discounted access in exchange for their support. This could be structured as a tiered volunteer program: those who work for a certain number of hours get access to specific event experiences, such as attending a VIP section, receiving a meal voucher, or participating in exclusive activities. This approach not only encourages broader participation but also fosters a sense of belonging and ownership in the community-centered event.

- **Providing Recognition:** Recognition is key to retaining volunteers and reinforcing their value. Acknowledging volunteers' efforts—whether through verbal praise during the event, recognition on social media or in event materials, or through post-event thank-you notes or certificates—helps them feel seen and appreciated. This recognition should highlight the integral role they play in creating the event's success, making them feel like valued contributors alongside paid staff.
- **Ensuring Accessibility:** Volunteers should have access to the same event experiences as the attendees they are helping. This means ensuring that all volunteers—especially those in roles that require physical activity or long hours—are provided with sufficient breaks, food, and access to comfortable seating during their shifts. Volunteer areas should be equipped with necessities, such as restrooms, designated break areas, and food/drink stations. For those involved in hospitality roles, such as greeters or ushers, it's especially important that they have the opportunity to participate in key event moments, such as speeches, performances, or community-building activities. To further promote inclusivity, volunteers should be encouraged to attend the event's social moments and enjoy the experiences, ensuring they are not excluded from the benefits of the event. This also includes ensuring that volunteers with disabilities or other accessibility needs have appropriate accommodations to fully participate in the event.

Post-Event: Reflecting, Evaluating, & Improving

The post-event phase is a critical opportunity for deep reflection, assessment, and growth. Beyond simply closing out the event, this stage allows nonprofits to gather valuable insights, strengthen relationships with attendees and donors, and identify areas for improvement. Thorough post-event reflection ensures that empathy-based fundraising remains responsive and community-centered, continuously evolving based on participant experiences and feedback. This phase involves measuring the event's impact through key metrics, collecting feedback directly from the community, and using the insights gained to enhance future events. By prioritizing transparent evaluation and continuous improvement, nonprofits can refine their fundraising strategies, build greater trust with their supporters, and foster long-term engagement.

Empathy-Driven Metrics

The empathy-driven metrics phase focuses on evaluating the relational, emotional, and community-building impact of the event, going beyond traditional financial assessments. While revenue and attendance numbers are important, empathy-based fundraising prioritizes measuring how effectively the event fostered emotional connections, strengthened community ties, and elevated the nonprofit's mission. This involves analyzing qualitative and quantitative indicators, such as attendee satisfaction, social media resonance, and the visibility of the event's impact narrative. By tracking these metrics, nonprofits can assess how well the event cultivated empathy and advanced the organization's community-centered goals.

- **Attendee Satisfaction:** Gathering qualitative feedback from attendees is essential for understanding how the event resonated on a personal level. This can be done through post-event surveys, interviews, or informal conversations. Questions should focus on emotional takeaways, perceived inclusivity, and the overall event experience. Did attendees feel more connected to the cause? Were they moved by the storytelling and performances? High satisfaction levels indicate that the event successfully fostered empathy and strengthened donor relationships, while areas of dissatisfaction can highlight opportunities for improvement.
- **Community Engagement:** Measuring online and offline engagement provides insight into how effectively the event inspired broader community interest. This includes tracking social media mentions, shares, comments, and tagged posts related to the event. A spike in social media activity or positive attendee posts can indicate that the event generated meaningful conversations and emotional resonance. Additionally, observing follow-up actions—such as new followers, donor sign-ups, or event-related inquiries—helps measure whether the event sparked ongoing interest in the organization's mission.
- **Impact Visibility:** Assessing how clearly the event communicated the organization's mission and empathy-based values is a key metric. This involves analyzing whether the event's messaging, performances, and visuals effectively conveyed the cause's importance. Nonprofits can review recordings, event photos, and attendee feedback

to determine whether the event narrative centered the voices of the community served, presented authentic storytelling, and inspired solidarity. Strong impact visibility demonstrates that the event successfully elevated the nonprofit's mission and fostered a deeper connection with attendees.

Community Feedback

Gathering authentic community feedback is essential for understanding the event's effectiveness, emotional resonance, and areas for growth. By directly engaging with attendees, staff, and volunteers, nonprofits can gather diverse perspectives on the event experience, pinpoint strengths, and identify areas needing improvement. Community feedback also demonstrates a commitment to listening, transparency, and continuous responsiveness—core values of empathy-based fundraising. By applying this feedback, organizations can refine future events to better align with the needs and expectations of their community.

- **Post-Event Surveys:** Surveys are a valuable tool for collecting direct feedback from attendees about their experiences. These surveys should include both quantitative and qualitative questions, asking attendees to rate the event's accessibility, engagement, and emotional impact. Open-ended questions can reveal personal reflections on the event's messaging, inclusivity, and effectiveness in fostering empathy. Analyzing these responses allows nonprofits to gauge the event's strengths and uncover opportunities for improvement.
- **Staff & Volunteer Debriefs:** Internal feedback is equally important for identifying logistical strengths and challenges. Hosting a staff and volunteer debrief session shortly after the event enables the team to reflect on what worked well, areas of difficulty, and suggestions for future events. This process allows nonprofits to refine their operations, enhance staff coordination, and address logistical gaps. Gathering feedback from frontline staff also provides insights into attendee interactions and overall event dynamics, helping to strengthen future planning.

Continuous Improvement

The continuous improvement phase is where nonprofits translate post-event insights into actionable changes for future events. By carefully analyzing event metrics and community feedback, organizations can refine their planning processes, strengthen partnerships, and enhance their overall fundraising effectiveness. This stage also involves transparent reporting, sharing the event's impact with attendees, donors, and community members to foster trust and demonstrate accountability. Continuous improvement ensures that each event becomes more effective, inclusive, and community-centered than the last.

- **Refine Planning Processes:** Using the feedback and insights gathered, nonprofits can adjust their event planning strategies to enhance future experiences. This may involve streamlining registration processes, improving event flow, or enhancing accessibility. If attendees or staff highlighted logistical challenges, such as long check-in times or unclear instructions, these issues should be addressed in future event plans. Continuous refinement helps create smoother, more engaging, and better-organized events.
- **Strengthen Community Partnerships:** Building on the relationships formed during the event is key to fostering long-term support and collaboration. Nonprofits should follow up with sponsors, donors, and community partners to express appreciation and explore potential future partnerships. This can involve personalized thank-you messages, impact reports, or invitations to future events. Strengthening these relationships helps nonprofits cultivate long-term support networks and expand their reach.
- **Transparent Reporting:** Sharing the event's outcomes, impact, and financial results with attendees and the wider community demonstrates accountability and builds trust. Nonprofits should provide clear, accessible reports highlighting how the funds raised will be used, along with meaningful stories or testimonials showcasing the event's impact. Visual reports, infographics, or video recaps can make the information more engaging and easily shareable. Transparent reporting not only fosters donor trust but also strengthens the nonprofit's credibility and reinforces its commitment to community accountability.

Moving Forward with Empathy-Based Fundraising

Having explored an empathy-based, community-centered approach to nonprofit fundraising and its application to fundraising events, it's time to consider how these insights can enhance fundraising strategies for the future. Whether planning events, refining existing campaigns, or evaluating community engagement efforts, the principles of empathy-driven fundraising offer a foundation for ongoing growth and meaningful impact.

Looking ahead, these principles can be adapted to a variety of contexts, from virtual events to diverse community dynamics. Exploring emerging trends, such as digital engagement and social media strategies, can provide additional tools to strengthen connections and foster long-term support. By integrating these principles, nonprofits can ensure that their fundraising efforts are not only financially successful but also closely aligned with the values and aspirations of the communities they serve.

Practical Tools & Strategies

Implementing empathy-based, community-centered fundraising requires more than just philosophical principles—it demands practical tools, actionable techniques, and tangible resources to effectively execute events and campaigns. This section offers concrete strategies and tools that nonprofits can use to strengthen their empathy-driven fundraising efforts. From authentic storytelling tips and relationship-centered donor engagement strategies to ready-to-use templates and additional resources, this section provides nonprofits with practical guidance for building meaningful, mission-driven fundraising practices.

Storytelling Tips

Authentic, narrative-driven storytelling is a powerful tool in empathy-based fundraising. When crafted with care, stories humanize the cause, foster emotional connections, and inspire meaningful action. Effective storytelling goes beyond surface-level anecdotes—it centers the voices and lived experiences of the community served, highlights their strengths and resilience, and connects donors to the broader mission. The following tips help nonprofits create ethical, compelling, and empathy-driven stories.

- **Center Community Voices:** The most impactful fundraising stories prioritize the voices of those directly impacted by the nonprofit’s mission. Rather than positioning the organization or donors as saviors, stories should elevate the experiences, strengths, and agency of the individuals and communities served. Use first-person quotes, interviews, and testimonials to make the narrative authentic. For example, instead of saying, “Our organization helped 50 families access literacy programs,” frame it through the community’s voice: “Thanks to the program, my child now feels confident reading aloud at school.”
- **Show Strength, Not Suffering:** Avoid exploitative storytelling that relies on pity or saviorism. Instead, craft narratives that highlight resilience, dignity, and empowerment. Share how individuals are actively shaping their own futures with the nonprofit’s support rather than being depicted as helpless recipients. For

example, rather than showcasing a struggling individual in a disempowering light, illustrate their journey of growth and success through the support of the community.

- **Use Sensory and Emotional Detail:** Vivid, emotionally resonant language makes stories more relatable and memorable. Use sensory details and specific anecdotes to immerse audiences in the narrative. For instance, instead of stating, “The family received food assistance,” describe the moment: “The scent of freshly baked bread filled the kitchen as Maria unpacked the food box, grateful for the meal she could share with her children.” This paints a picture that evokes empathy and connection.
- **Include Clear Calls to Action:** An effective fundraising story doesn’t just inspire empathy—it motivates action. End stories with clear, compelling calls to action that encourage donors to contribute, volunteer, or spread awareness. For example, after sharing a testimonial about how donations support free LGBTQ+ literacy programming, conclude with: “You can help us continue this life-changing work. Donate today to empower more young readers.”

Donor Engagement Techniques

Building and maintaining meaningful donor relationships is central to empathy-based fundraising. Unlike transactional donor interactions, empathy-driven donor engagement prioritizes connection, transparency, and shared values. These techniques help nonprofits nurture authentic, long-term relationships with donors, fostering trust and encouraging ongoing support.

- **Personalized Communication:** Donors are more likely to remain engaged when they feel seen, valued, and connected. Use personalized messaging in emails, letters, and event invitations by addressing donors by name and referencing their past support. Share specific impact stories related to their contributions. For example, rather than a generic “thank you,” say: “Because of your generous support, we were able to fund 10 new literacy workshops for LGBTQ+ youth.” This makes the donor feel directly connected to the cause.
- **Consistent, Meaningful Updates:** Regularly share mission-driven updates with donors, highlighting the impact of their contributions. Use email newsletters, social

media posts, and personal letters to share success stories, event highlights, and community testimonials. For major donors or recurring supporters, consider occasional phone calls or handwritten notes to express appreciation and provide meaningful updates.

- **Mission-First Donor Events:** Host intimate, mission-centered events that prioritize meaningful interaction over solicitation. Invite donors to behind-the-scenes tours, meet-and-greets with program participants, or storytelling nights where they can hear directly from the community served. These events strengthen emotional connections and reinforce donors' commitment to the cause.
- **Impact-Driven Acknowledgments:** When recognizing donors, focus on impact over transaction. Instead of simply listing donor names, share stories or testimonials that reflect the real-world outcomes of their support. For instance, feature a short story from a program participant alongside the donor acknowledgment, demonstrating how their contribution made a difference.

[Sample Templates & Checklists](#)

To streamline fundraising operations, this section provides ready-to-use templates and checklists for event planning, donor outreach, and post-event evaluation. These

practical tools help nonprofits organize and execute their fundraising efforts efficiently and effectively, ensuring alignment with empathy-based principles.

Event Planning Checklist

Donor Outreach Email Template

Subject Line: Thank You for Empowering Youth through Literacy

Event Planning Checklist

Before	<p>Pre-Event Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Define fundraising goals (financial, community engagement, visibility) <input type="checkbox"/> Identify target audience & outreach strategies <input type="checkbox"/> Select venue & ensure accessibility <input type="checkbox"/> Secure sponsors & partnerships <input type="checkbox"/> Develop event program (speakers, performers, & storytelling components) <input type="checkbox"/> Create & distribute promotional materials <input type="checkbox"/> Establish safety & security protocols
During	<p>Day-of Execution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure welcoming & inclusive registration process <input type="checkbox"/> Provide clear signage & accessibility accommodations <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitate empathy-driven storytelling (personal narratives, testimonials) <input type="checkbox"/> Monitor & support community engagement (raffles, auctions, networking)
After	<p>Post-Event Reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Collect attendee & staff feedback through surveys & debriefs <input type="checkbox"/> Analyze empathy-related metrics & donor retention data <input type="checkbox"/> Share event outcomes & express gratitude to donors & attendees

Dear [Name],

We are incredibly grateful for your support of Drag Story Hour-Arizona! With your support, we were able to [insert specific impact of support here]. Your commitment empowers individuals in our community to access safe, affirming spaces where they can learn, connect, and thrive!

We'd love to keep you updated on the amazing impact you're making. You can follow our progress on social media or join us at our next event!

Thank you for being part of our vital mission!

With gratitude,

[Sender's Name]

Drag Story Hour-Arizona

Post-Event Feedback Survey Template

Use this template to gather attendee feedback and measure the effectiveness of an event. Customize the look and wording of questions based on the specific event.

1. "How satisfied were you with the event experience?"
 - a. Scale of 1 to 5 - from "Very Satisfied" to "Very Dissatisfied"
2. "What aspects of the event resonated with you most?"
 - a. Check all that apply:
 - i. Storytelling
 - ii. Performances
 - iii. Community connection
 - iv. [Note: keep adding options depending on the contents of the event]
3. "Do you feel more connected to DSH-Az's mission after attending this event?"
 - a. Yes or no options
4. "How likely are you to attend future events or support DSH-Az again?"
 - a. Scale of 1 to 5 - from "Very Likely" to "Very Unlikely"
5. "Any additional feedback or suggestions?"
 - a. Open-ended question

[Additional Resources](#)

To support continued learning and growth in empathy-based fundraising, this section offers a curated list of resources that provide valuable insights, strategies, and best practices, helping nonprofits deepen their understanding of empathy-driven fundraising and refine their approaches over time.

- [The Generosity Network](#) by Jennifer McCrea & Jeffrey C. Walker
 - A guide on relationship-based fundraising through collaboration and empathy
- [How to Tell a Story: The Essential Guide to Memorable Storytelling](#) by The Moth
 - Practical techniques for crafting powerful, human-centered narratives
- [Community-Centric Fundraising](#)
 - “Community-Centric Fundraising is a fundraising model that is grounded in equity and social justice. We prioritize the entire community over individual organizations, foster a sense of belonging and interdependence, present our work not as individual transactions but holistically, and encourage mutual support between nonprofits.”
- [“The Ethical Rainmaker” Podcast](#) by Michelle Muri
 - “From grounding practices in donor experiences instead of a community's needs, to a lack of political, race, class, and power analyses, traditional fundraising practices often perpetuate the very injustices the nonprofit sector wishes to end. The Ethical Rainmaker is a podcast that hosts authentic conversations grappling with the questions that we don't often ask in the nonprofit world.”

By leveraging these resources, nonprofits can enhance their empathy-based fundraising efforts, strengthen community connections, and foster more meaningful donor relationships.

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