

Will it Play In Peoria? Fundraising Ethics Here, There and Everywhere

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Some of my growing up years, which were erratic at best, were spent in Bolivia. I distinctly recall an American dignitary who had learned Spanish quite well and was speaking to an audience of non-Spanish speakers—members of an indigenous tribe. Therefore he needed a translator. As the speech proceeded, the guest speaker noticed that his audience wasn't reacting to what he said in ways he expected. So he stopped and in sotto voce said to his translator, "Are you translating what I'm saying?" The translator looked back at him calmly and innocently, then replied, "No, but I know what the people need."

This anecdote typifies both the challenges and the dilemmas we as fundraisers experience when we apply ethics principles to a global practice. We are accustomed to ethics guidelines as they are accepted and implemented, for the most part, in America. We sign the Association of Fundraising Professionals Code of Ethics statement and promise to adhere to it. We generally have at least an awareness of the essential values and ethical behaviors statements by
INDEPENDENT SECTOR.

- Commitment beyond self.
- Commitment beyond the law
- Commitment to the public good.
- Respect for the value and dignity of individuals.
- Tolerance, diversity and social justice.
- Accountability
- Openness and honesty
- Obedience to the laws.

We respect the ten major ethical values identified by a Josephson Institute survey:

Honesty
Concern for Others
Integrity
Respect for Others
Promise-Keeping
Law-Abidingness/Civic Duty
Loyalty/Fidelity
Pursuit of Excellence
Fairness
Personal Accountability

Like a musician who almost automatically knows what keys to press in order to play a certain piece of music, we professionals in fundraising probably don't give a great deal of thought to how the values and behaviors could really be expressed and explained.

However, as our profession has become global, and many fundraisers in North America are invited to or choose to work on an international scale, the question of how to apply ethical

practices and principles in other countries becomes of increasing importance. Also, as AFP becomes even more of an international association, how is ethical practice executed in countries outside of North America? How, for example, would a Brazilian fundraiser interpret the ethical behavior of accountability? How would someone in Japan explain what pursuit of excellence means? Do we, or our counterparts and colleagues in other countries, have a congruent view of what global application of ethical practice really means? Or, do we need to become more flexible in our thinking and say, like the translator in Bolivia, “we know what the people need?” Obviously one size doesn’t fit all as the fundraising profession is embraced and practiced on all continents except Antarctica! From Australia to Finland, from South Africa to Ecuador, from Taiwan to France, cultural norms, traditions, values and practices differ, sometimes enormously, and therefore it stands to reason that application of ethical principles will also vary greatly.

Some of the major points of divergence in both opinion and interpretation are the following.

- Working on a commission. Some countries have percentage-based compensation. In America this practice violates the Code of Ethics, but what if this is accepted practice among professionals in other countries?
- Board membership. In many countries board members serve because it benefits themselves and their friends. Board members serve for personal gain and not for the benefit of the organization, and at times do not understand their fiduciary responsibilities.
- Stewardship and respect of donor intent. Organizations sometimes disregard donor intent and use the money as desired internally. Of course, this occurs in North America as well, but a wider acceptance of this in other countries complicates the issue.
- Privacy issues. Concerns about citizen privacy, many of which have legal bases, vary from country to country. Some countries are far more concerned about privacy and extend their restrictions to something like direct mail lists.
- Kickbacks. In some places it’s customary for the corporate giving officer to expect a percentage of the donation he or she has handled to be returned for personal gain. *Quid pro quo* demands or requests are also not uncommon.

Before we pass judgment on practices that do not jive with American values and expected behaviors, perhaps it’s good to come back to a fundamental statement that defines ethics. Perhaps it’s time to reconfigure our thinking that is exemplified via a well-known cliché—“Will it play in Peoria?”

The phrase originated during the vaudeville era and was popularized in movies. The belief was that if a new show was successful in Peoria, a main Midwestern stop for vaudeville acts, it would be successful anywhere. Just because a certain set of ethical standards works in America, will these work elsewhere . . . or more importantly, is it fair to expect our standards to work outside of American borders?

As our fundraising profession proliferated internationally in the last two decades, fundraisers in many countries began to pay attention to what America does. Some used the AFP Code of Ethics as a beginning point or as a foundation for customizing standards to a local setting. Others adopted the code, but made adjustments that respected local culture. A code of ethics also became critical in countries where no legal structures existed for the nonprofit sector, and a code was equally important in places where legal structures began to be created. An outgrowth of this was the production of a monumental and momentous work, the creation of the

International Statement of Ethical Principles in Fundraising (addressed elsewhere in this journal). The statement fostered the growth of a worldwide community of fundraisers dedicated to accountability, honesty, respect for their donors and their own causes, and commitment to professional standards.

It was recognized that the statement provided guidance for ethical practice in areas where fundraising was just developing as a professional pursuit. It provided a focal point in areas where local customs might not have represented what increasingly was accepted as best practices. As the introduction to the “Standards of Practice” stated, fundraisers operate in many jurisdictions and must observe the laws, but that ethical practice goes beyond “obedience to the unenforceable,” a term coined by INDEPENDENT SECTOR and one that truly explain both the flexibility as well as adaptability of ethical observance.

As we accept and eagerly embrace the fact that as American fundraising professionals we no longer are an island but are part of the greater whole, we also would do well to review basic principles that can guide, not dictate, practice anywhere.

Two noted authors, Blanchard and Peale, who wrote *The Power of Ethical Management* set up three sets of questions that might guide us whether we’re working in Kentucky or Kenya, Maryland or Madagascar, California or Cambodia. These in addition to the AFP Code of Ethics or the International Code of Ethics are what make us true professionals—if we can consider these when decision-making pushes us beyond what we take for granted and find comfortable.

- Is it legal? Will I be breaking a law or violating a policy?
- Is it balanced and fair, both now and in the future, and does it allow for a win-win situation as much as possible?
- What will I think of myself, or how will it make me feel about myself? If the decision were published in a paper or on the Web, would I feel good? How would my family and friends feel and what would they think of me?

I conclude with a widely-accepted definition of ethics which fits us exceedingly well as professionals in fundraising:

Ethics isn't simply a list of behaviors, a set of restrictions on what we can and cannot do. Ethics isn't just something we do because we know people are watching us. Ethics is a reflection of ourselves. Ethical behavior expresses who we are – what values we hold dear and what principles we will always fight for. Our ethics go straight to the heart of who we are.

The Power of Ethical Management, Kenneth Blanchard and Norman Vincent Peale 1995