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RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT

# What Happens When a Nonprofit Stops Measuring Fundraisers' Success Based on Money? Oregon Food Bank Is Trying to Find Out.

By *Eden Stiffman*

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OREGON FOOD BANK

**The Oregon Food Bank wants to help people understand the root causes of hunger — and to take action to fight it.**

In an interview for the top fundraising job at the Oregon Food Bank, C. Nathan Harris was asked if he had ever developed an innovative approach to fundraising work. His answer: putting less emphasis on financial goals for fundraisers as a measure of success and more on human-focused measures like relationships with supporters.

Jokingly, he described his philosophy using a lyric from the Broadway musical hit *Rent*: “How do you measure a year? What about love?”

His answer must have left an impression. Harris got the job.

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At the time, the approach was largely theoretical. But Harris and his development team are now working to apply it.

The experiment has multiple goals: to make fundraising a more just profession, to build more authentic relationships with donors and the broader community, and to help the public understand the root causes of hunger — and to take action to fight it. It borrows ideas and language from social-justice organizers, much of which might seem foreign to many fundraisers. The wholesale reimagining of what development can be is very much a work in progress, but the organization hopes the new approach will advance its mission and improve the giving experience for donors and fundraisers alike.

“Together we are going to create something different that is rooted in philanthropy’s true meaning, a love for humankind, and is rooted in equity,” says Harris.

Yes, fundraisers are still responsible for raising money. “We’re not abandoning the idea of financial goals,” Harris says. “At the end of the day, we still have to hold ourselves accountable as effective stewards of the resources we need to fulfill the food bank’s mission.” But fundraisers will not be evaluated based on the money they bring in.

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Leaders are working to develop tools that allow them to track other indicators of donor engagement and staff satisfaction. That pivot requires the food bank to provide more opportunities for individuals and organizations to learn, grow, and engage in action and connect with the cause — with gifts seen as just one of many ways individuals show their “love” of the cause.

Measuring love is a squishy proposition. Food-bank leaders say it’s an experiment they’re building as they go. But they say their North Star is the organization’s values, not cash.

## Burnout and Underperformance

The problems that the food bank’s approach seeks to address will not surprise anyone working in fundraising.

“An orientation to financial outcomes in which we value the financial contribution of the donor more than the integrity and well-being of our staff creates the conditions for [high turnover](#),” Harris says.



OREGON FOOD BANK

**Making financial results the top priority for fundraisers leads to inequities and burnout, says C. Nathan Harris, the Oregon Food Bank's development director.**

Fundraisers who face sexual harassment or racism, particularly from donors, may hesitate to report it, worried it could have a negative impact on their careers and ability to close future gifts. Fundraisers also feel they're being held accountable to financial goals when they don't ultimately have control over whether donors decide to give.

Case in point: the pandemic. Food banks and pantries across the United States have seen unprecedented demand over the past year. The crisis reversed the past decade's progress toward ending hunger in the United States, and donors have stepped up to support the charities that meet immediate needs and address hunger's causes. A survey of the 200 food banks in Feeding America's network found that together they raised 106 percent more in the 2020 fiscal year than in the previous year.

While fundraisers worked themselves into the ground to connect with donors and acknowledge gifts, last year's record high revenues may have had more to do with donors' concern about the Covid economic crisis than specific actions taken by fundraisers. Still, fundraisers may feel pressure to continue to bring in high levels of support even in an environment in which donors are less inclined or able to give. That can lead to burnout.

“If we’re managing staff to financial outcomes, that results in a profession that is [less diverse](#), that is [hostile to women](#), and that generates burnout,” Harris says. “The nonprofit sector is sort of committing itself to [a cycle of underperformance](#).”

In addition, the field’s laser focus on raising more money means that some donors — particular those from lower-income backgrounds and communities of color — often receive less attention from development staff. What’s more, financial contributions are many people’s primary form of engagement with causes and social movements today, says Mario Lugay, senior innovation director at [Justice Funders](#), who has helped the food bank team develop its approach. As the statewide network of food banks and pantries, Oregon Food Bank aims to become a “political home” that helps facilitate supporters’ civic engagement.

“If donating is a proxy for relationships that people want to have, and development staff are the ones managing that, then they’re in this unique position” to influence other forms of engagement around the movement to end hunger, Lugay says.

To be sure, Harris still reports to his board’s finance and audit committee on a regular basis, and his team still reports monthly on progress toward financial goals.

But much of what’s measured in a fundraising office is a direct result of how its database is built. So alongside financial indicators like dollars raised and the number of donors giving, Harris’s team is working to measure things like how much donor research a fundraiser had done or the number of acknowledgment letters sent.

Over time, Harris and his team hope to be able to track things like whether a supporter volunteers, contributes to other organizations united in the fight to end hunger, or engages in advocacy for a more just food system, from growing it to transporting and marketing it — all defined by the team as indicators of love and equity.

These factors also guide prospect management and will ultimately change the composition of fundraisers’ portfolios.

## Staff Reactions

While some of these new practices are works in progress, other changes happened quickly. The development department was renamed the Community Philanthropy team to honor fundraising ideas and principles that recognize the interconnectedness between the organization’s staff as a whole and the communities it serves.

Most fundraisers received new titles — many felt the common title of “officer” evoked police and military imagery. Gift officers are now called “developers.” Several additional staff members were hired, and the team was restructured so that fundraisers now manage fewer donors.

In August 2020, about eight months into the department's transformation, the team came together to share feedback and talk about their fears and concerns.

Some staff members felt like they could take bigger risks, innovate, and better align the team's work to the values of the organization. Others were concerned about a lack of clarity on performance measures.

Barb Young, a veteran fundraiser, has been at the Oregon Food Bank for a decade and works directly with major donors. When Harris joined the team, Young says she was supportive of his vision in theory but was skeptical about how it would pan out in practice.

"My philosophy has always been to build authentic relationships with donors," Young says. And that hasn't changed.

Early on, she wondered how an organization that relies on fundraising success to maintain its substantial operations would ultimately put less emphasis on money as a measurement of success.

When she served as a development director at previous organizations, the buck stopped with her to report to the board and make sure the nonprofit was meeting its operating goals. It's been challenging to leave monetary goals behind, or at least to give them less weight, she says. "It's so ingrained in you as a fundraiser that you've got this number to hit," she says. "The biggest change is being able to let that go."

But over time, she's found the changes to be liberating, she says. She went from managing a portfolio of around 220 donors to close to 150. "It really opens up the ability to take the time necessary to really cultivate and nurture meaningful relationships," she says. "It encourages risk taking that we may not have felt comfortable with before."

Young also appreciates that she and her colleagues have been able to help shape the vision and its evolution instead of being handed a strategy from the top down. "We all had the opportunity to contribute and have our voices heard," she says.

Zakiya Jackson heard Harris speak at a national gathering of food-bank employees and was drawn to his focus on community and equity. At the time, she worked at a food bank in Madison, Wisc., and had become disenchanted with how she saw fundraising teams operating. "We know that we need the dollars," she says, "but it seems as though that has taken precedence over the actual mission and the communities, the people that we serve."

When she interviewed for a position at the Oregon Food Bank, she had questions about how her performance would be evaluated.

“I wanted to know, Is there a quarterly financial goal that I need to reach and aspire to? Are there so many donors that I need to be speaking with and connecting with on a monthly basis? In my past experience, that has been baked into my job description,” Jackson says.

She joined the team in February in a role focused on corporate and community relations.

She’s still getting to know supporters and potential donors, but she says her conversations have been about what it means to support the food bank. “The focus is greater on what the organization or business can offer,” she says. “It doesn’t feel to me that there’s this tight timeline of when you need to be able to close that gift.”

She now feels other pressures, as more conversations have focused on how supporters can help advance equity in the community. But she sees that as an opportunity, she says.

It has also changed the way she views her work. “I’m more motivated,” Jackson says. “I’m definitely more inspired because I have something that I truly, truly believe in.”

## Provocative Questions

Motivation for the work is one of the food bank’s new indicators of success, as measured by [an internal staff assessment](#), which was inspired by a “Brown paper” written by strategy and evaluation consultant Shiree Teng called “[Measuring Love on the Journey to Justice](#).”

It asks fundraisers how they see their work, their colleagues, and supporters in a variety of dimensions. For example, does a fundraiser feel able to treat supporters from all walks of life equitably — including those with great wealth, those who are experiencing food insecurity, young donors?

Other questions stand in sharp contrast to traditional measures of employee satisfaction. For example, it asks employees to reflect on statements like: “My self-care habits are revolutionary acts of resistance to capitalistic exploitation and extraction.”

A [new donor survey](#), which was first conducted in March and April, looks different than what donors are accustomed to seeing: It aims to measure things like whether the food bank has helped supporters identify new ways to take action to end hunger and if the food bank’s marketing and communication materials contributed to that supporter’s understanding of systemic inequity as hunger’s true cause.

The survey asks to what extent donors agree or disagree with statements like: “I consider my support a sign of my love for my neighbors who benefit from Oregon Food Bank’s work — those experiencing systemic inequity rooted in racism, xenophobia, transphobia, classism, sexism, and more.”

About 1,600 donors responded to the survey, and just a handful — around 15 to 20 donors — responded with a criticism of the survey, Harris says. “Some people were like, ‘Look, I don’t need to be in love with you. I’m really just here to make a gift.’”

Respondents were also asked to react to short fictional stories about people experiencing hunger in an attempt to better understand donor attitudes about the causes of hunger and poverty. It asks them to identify the cause of the character’s food insecurity and which characters are the “real heroes” of the story . Respondents also received a followup email explaining why the “mythological narratives,” which the food bank called “pervasive and hurtful,” were introduced. “These narratives do not resonate with OFB and with many of our supporters,” the email explained.

Harris expects to repeat a version of that survey every 12 to 18 months or so to track change.

### **‘So Much More Human’**

[The food bank’s blog post](#) about its change began circulating around fundraising networks last year.

When it reached Kim Klein, a veteran fundraising consultant for grassroots social-justice nonprofits, she said the food bank was saying something out loud that everybody had been thinking for years.

“In the past couple decades, people have become way too financially driven,” Klein says. “The great thing about data is you send out this many appeals, you get this percent back. It’s very precise, and you can plot it on a graph. People like it.” But measuring how you meet human needs is inherently different, she says. “It’s tricky because it’s a little bit more mushy.”

Klein wasn’t a stranger to Harris’s work. She consulted with the Transgender Law Center when Harris was development director there, but she has not consulted with the Oregon Food Bank.

As the food bank’s experiment progresses, one question is whether the shift will affect fundraising.





OREGON FOOD BANK

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It's likely that many food banks and other organizations that saw a spike in donations in 2020 will see a [return to pre-pandemic patterns](#) this year, and [donor retention](#) is on the minds of many of the food bank's fundraisers. Klein says if the food bank's retention rate drops, as it likely will for many social-service groups this year, it's not going to be because of this strategy. "Ironically, I think this will lead them to much more money."

Klein explains that donors who gave \$1,000 in 2019 and then lost their jobs in 2020 and weren't able to give last year would be considered lapsed donors by traditional financial metrics, and fundraisers might work to get them to come back and make another gift. But in the food bank's approach, they would still be viewed as supporters. Fundraisers might say, "They're not donating right now, but they're still a donor. Let's keep in touch with them. Let's hope they find a job. Let's hope that their finances turn around," she says. "It's so much more human."

One early test indicated that the new approach may resonate with supporters. The shift allowed staff to feel comfortable trying something different than the direct-mail messaging that has worked well for food banks for ages, such as: "Your donation of \$1 equals three meals for a hungry child."

“That has been such a successful message for financial outputs for so long that we haven’t tested other messaging that might tell a true story of hunger,” Harris says.

Fundraisers tested the message to see how donors would respond. The new story showcased the root causes of hunger — it talked about how systemic inequities and systemic oppression drive poverty, and poverty drives hunger.

“We were hesitant to tell that story so boldly and so broadly because we weren’t certain it would produce the same kinds of financial outcomes as that tried-and-true message of a hungry child,” Harris says.

The new appeal raised more money and generated a higher average gift, but the difference in gift size between the two appeals wasn’t statistically significant.

The mailing may have also helped move the needle on public awareness of hunger and its causes.

Harris worries that other organizations may adopt this kind of messaging without doing the work on internal culture and alternative measurement. “I sometimes fear that the idea of de-centering money to center love and equity might actually generate better financial outcomes,” he says. If the idea is co-opted for financial reasons, he wonders, “will it actually work?”

There may be moments when the values-driven approach is in tension with the need to raise money, admits Harris. For example, in the first six months of the food bank’s current fiscal year, 53,000 unique donors made gifts. That’s a huge spike from the 20,000 unique donors who supported the food bank during the same period last year. While a quick acknowledgment from the food bank may be perceived as the organization caring for the donor, the time may be viewed as unrealistic urgency, even rooted in [white-supremacy culture](#), Harris says.

This led to a discussion among the team that processes donations and sends gift acknowledgments: Does it make sense to measure the time it takes for the team to send an acknowledgment letter in fundraiser evaluations?

They concluded that it may make sense but that when donation volume is overwhelming, the team should instead look at other elements of their work to determine whether they’ve been successful. “When you have a team designed to process gifts from 30,000 annual donors and suddenly you have 53,000 in six months, the time it takes to process a gift is an unreasonable or even impossible” evaluation measure, Harris says.

The Community Philanthropy team also drafted [a staff Bill of Rights](#). At the top of that list: “Our team members have a right to work safely, authentically, and free from discrimination and harm while bringing their holistic, intersectional identities to fulfilling Oregon Food Bank’s mission and vision.”

## Revolutionary Voices

The food bank's approach draws on language from author and social activist bell hooks.

"The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change," she wrote in her 2001 book *Salvation: Black People and Love*. "Without love, our lives are without meaning. Love is the heart of the matter. When all else has fallen away, love sustains."

Using revolutionary voices to bolster the food bank's argument is apt, says Klein, the consultant. But she doesn't view the group's approach as radical. All nonprofits find themselves in a kind of liminal space at this stage in the pandemic.

"We're not really in-Covid, but we're not quite post-Covid, so we're in this kind of doorway," she says. "This is a chance for all nonprofits — regardless of whether they're super corporate, super data-driven, super community organizing-focused — to say, 'OK, once we cross through the door to a truly post-Covid world, how do we want to be?' Let's not go back to the old ways because almost nothing about the way things were before Covid was working."

Reimagining the fundraising department during a time of remote work and instability has posed challenges, but Harris agrees the timing is right.

"An environment that is already in flux can be an environment ripe for change," he says.

Everyone has to grapple with the question of whether they've made an impact in the world, Harris says. For his part, he is proud of what his team has accomplished so far. "I hope that each of them look in the mirror every day and reflect back to themselves: 'We're making transformational change aligned with our values.'"

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*Correction (May 19, 2021, 8:36 p.m.): An earlier version of this story said that about 16,000 donors, not 1,600, responded to a survey.*

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*A version of this article appeared in the [June 1, 2021, issue](#).*

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