



AFP Information Exchange

Resilience Plays Remarkable Role in Fundraising Campaigns

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This **AFP Information Exchange** resource is provided by:
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Imagine you have 60 trained volunteers ready to hit the road to make leadership calls for your capital campaign. Then suddenly:

- The planning and zoning department pulls the rug out from under your building plans
- Terrorists strike our country
- The community's leading employer closes its doors
- A major flood devastates the area
- The economy tanks

The above examples represent actual situations in capital campaigns that went on to be successful. Why did these organizations succeed in the face of catastrophic events, acts of God or economic downturns? One common trait they shared is resilience.

The Mayo Clinic defines resilience as “being able to adapt to life’s misfortunes and setbacks” through improved coping skills to handle life’s stresses. In fundraising, those stressors can range from scandals within an organization to economic hardships to leadership changes—each requiring strong coping skills.

In *The Mind’s Eye* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks says some people are more resilient than others. “Seemingly strong people may buckle in the face of a catastrophe, and the seemingly weak won’t,” says Sacks. “Flexibility is crucial—and external resources, especially community and family, are equally important.”

Resilient people and organizations possess many distinctive characteristics:

- Board and volunteer passion is key in a fundraising campaign; their commitment is the single most important criterion of a successful campaign. No one is going to care as much and no one is going to have to work any harder or longer. One of ME&V’s most successful campaigns raised three times the campaign goal, largely thanks to the success and passion of the board members—two of whom served as campaign co-chairs.
- Awareness. Make sure all the needs and success stories are shared. Ask your community to imagine what it would be like without your organization. Thank people for their questions and answer them promptly. Be transparent.

- Recognize volunteers at every opportunity and in fun and varied ways. When everyone is on the same page, visualize turning a key in the building being planned.
- The history of giving within a community can make or break a campaign. The more successful the history of giving in a community, the better the outlook for the campaign, as long as there aren't too many campaigns competing at the same time.
- Sometimes it just takes innovation. When a Caribbean island lacked enough space to develop an 18-hole golf course, they didn't give up. They brought in Jack Nicklaus, and found their answer not in land or even the golf clubs used, but in a golf ball with its dimples on the outside—hence, it just doesn't travel as far. Your organization can change too.
- Campaign importance and a sense of urgency are sometimes overriding factors. The economy can greatly affect campaigns, representing a challenge or an excuse. But when something is needed *now*, campaigns can experience success through resilience despite economic woes.

Nothing will replace tenacity and optimism. When times are tough and results slow down, support networks become invaluable. These resources can take many forms—spiritual respite, reading a book, visiting a park or museum. It may involve support from members of your AFP chapter or connections with your social media friends. Even a member.

A philanthropic organization's resilience will determine success or failure more than education, experience, and training. In order to bounce back from misfortune, prepare before the fact through resilience training:

- Nonprofits should utilize their mission, vision, and value statements as tools to build strength within their organization and provide meaning through interpretation. Value systems within nonprofits change little over the years and present a framework in strained times, presenting a purpose beyond just raising money.
- Prepare for shifts in funding streams, fickle donors, and operational issues. Create a contingency plan before the fallout, and your organization will be better equipped to survive. A healthcare client experienced delays in launching a campaign because of state-imposed geographic restrictions on a particular form of therapy. Through perseverance and resilience, the hospital was able to work out a compromise and launch its campaign.

- Encourage innovative ideas and creativity in board members and staff. A resilient organization must possess the ability to make the most of what it has. It must devise solutions to problems without the obvious materials. It's more important to get the job done; philanthropic organizations that can continue on through chaos give others a sense of purpose and meaning.
- Look for collaborative opportunities. For one campaign, creating a partnership with a local community college that was looking for classroom space provided needed funds that helped to leverage a large state grant.

Finding the right combination of resilience for an organization isn't always cut and dry. But through training, experience and *resilience*, your campaign can move forward from surviving to thriving.

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MayoClinic.com



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Dee Vandeventer, Founder and Partner

Dee's passion is fundraising. As a founding partner and “retired” president of ME&V, an integrated marketing communications and fundraising company, she has worked with hundreds of nonprofits throughout the country. Dee earned her B.S. in Psychology from Iowa State University and an M.A. in Communications/ Public Relations from the University of Northern Iowa. Her public relations and fundraising career spans nearly three decades. She has developed and presented numerous seminars and workshops to organizations such as the Association of Fundraising Professionals' (AFP) 2003 and 2005-2009 International Conferences and served on AFP's Audio Conference Series. An avid volunteer, she lives by the philosophy of having fun while doing well.

Justin Tolan, Chief Fundraising Adviser

Justin has provided fundraising counsel to hospitals, arts, higher education and other nonprofit organizations since joining ME&V in 2001 as Chief Fundraising Adviser. His career includes more than 31 years in for-profit and nonprofit public relations and development, including six years at a human services agency where he was first a ME&V client. He is past president of the Eastern Iowa Chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals and a graduate of the University of Iowa. He volunteers with many youth organizations and takes special pride in his service through both the Big Brothers Big Sisters and Boy Scouts.

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