

**AFP Central PA Chapter “Vignette” Program, Presentation 3/10/10
RESPECT FOR DONORS, AND PERSONAL ETHICAL FRAMEWORK**

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Principle: This vignette is intended to illustrate the principles of respect for donors, and the importance of having an underlying personal ethical framework for your work.

Vignette: Some years ago I was working as a development director, and in that role was obviously responsible for creating strong relationships with donors. I’d spent years trying to do this by building trust through straightforward and accurate communications. Trust is to a development program what water is to fish.

At that time, a nationally publicized major incident stimulated a large public outpouring of contributions, to the point that the financial need created by the incident was soon met. My organization publicly announced the cessation of fundraising, and that no further contributions were needed as of a certain date.

We then had the problem of what to do with gifts that came in after that date, which were not needed for the cause for which they’d been given. It was decided to send a letter to those donors informing them of the situation. The draft of the letter I received from my regional superior, in my view, did not meet the standards of straightforwardness I’d tried to practice with my donors over the years, specifically by not including as an option refunding their money. At potential risk to my position I declined to send that text. In its place I drafted a letter with a default action of redirecting the gift to a similar need, because of course I wanted to keep the gifts, but I also clearly offered a refund.

The result of using this text was that, of the several hundred donors to whom we sent the letter, not a single one requested a refund or communicated any objection to the proposed default plan. My conclusion was that this way of treating donors turned a potentially negative situation into one that actually built donor trust and loyalty. By the donors’ saying nothing and hence agreeing to the proposal to redirect their gifts, they spoke loud and clear about how they felt they’d been treated and their degree of trust in the organization.

This is a micro case study in treating donors with respect through straightforward and respectful communication. It also illustrates how essential it is to have a personal philosophy or ethical framework under girding your work. I believe the results of this case illustrate the importance of these principles to a successful development program.

Postscript: This was a relatively simple situation where right and wrong were easier to discern than they often are. In my career, this is the exception. Most challenges in the area of straightforward communication are a lot more gray than black and white. You’re talking a thin and blurry line between acceptable and unacceptable. I readily admit that of the dozens of decisions I made in this area over the years, many involved degrees of compromise that challenged my comfort level. It is especially in these gray cases that a strongly held personal ethical framework is so important, because there are often strong countervailing forces to move the decision in the direction of short-term gain at any cost.