

Three Fundraising Curses

2) The Curse of Embarrassment

**David Burgess
Apollo Fundraising**

October 2018

The Curse of Embarrassment

While fundraisers are far from immune, the effects of this next curse are most severe when contracted by other people within the organisation. Unfortunately, this curse likes to prey on the people fundraisers rely on to help them the most - CEOs, board members, artistic directors, project managers and frontline staff.

They are all prone to the Curse of Embarrassment.

Maybe their embarrassment stems from a bad experience they had with a fundraiser in the past. Maybe it was something they read in a tabloid newspaper. Perhaps it's that very British trait of not wanting to talk about money. Whatever the root of the problem, their own personal fears have turned into a fixed belief that everybody hates being asked to give to charity.

Fundraising becomes something to be embarrassed about. And this embarrassment quickly spreads through an organisation. Like vampires, victims of the Curse of Embarrassment suck away at the lifeblood of your fundraising until it withers and dies.

Fundraising copy gets edited down to remove anything that could possibly offend those of a nervous disposition – no emotion, no passion and, if possible, no direct ask.

Calls to donate get hidden away, banished to the darkest corner of the building, the unread corners of the programme and the undiscoverable corners of the website.

Inoffensive forms of fundraising (gala dinners, raffles, donation boxes) are preferred to fundraising approaches that could actually raise you some money (like major gifts and legacies).

Fundraising is only mentioned in haste in board meetings - and only then if all the other important things have been covered (like what colour napkins to have at the next gala dinner).

The task of raising money is left to the last survivors. A small underground resistance movement silently raising money so that others don't have to think about where it has come from.

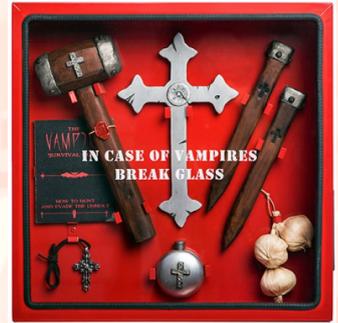
Out of sight, out of mind.

Out of money.

Make no mistake, the Curse of Embarrassment is fatal if left untreated.

So, what can be done about the Curse of Embarrassment

In arts and culture organisation the Curse of Embarrassment takes many forms. Here are some of the most common forms, and some steps you can take to protect yourself from them:



“Embarrassed to Ask”

“The thought of standing in front of someone and asking for their money terrifies me. I couldn’t possibly do it!”

The fear of actually “making the ask” – or even having a conversation about fundraising - is probably the most common form that the Curse of Embarrassment takes.

Being nervous before talking to a potential supporter is natural. And some would say it is a good sign – it shows you understand how important the conversation is - both for the organisation and the supporter.

But being nervous shouldn’t mean that you don’t ask.

Instead, you need to understand where the nervousness is coming from so that you can turn it into positive energy.



One of the main reasons people feel nervous is that they view fundraising as a one-sided relationship – where one person gives and the other takes, leaving the supporter poorer as a result of being asked. This makes the asker feel bad on their behalf – as if they are inflicting pain on this person.

You need to flip this mindset.

Because fundraising and giving to charity isn’t a one-sided relationship. The supporter might have less money after giving but they are certainly not poorer. Through their gift they have met a need they had. This might be the need to address a problem in society. It might be a need to see a show they really love come to life. It might be a need to give something back, or to do something for their community.

Whatever their motivation, by making the ask, you have given them the opportunity to address this need. You’ve given them the chance to do something they wanted to do.

Rather than thinking about what we are taking away, you need to reframe the relationship to think about what you are offering.

Here are some other things you can do to tackle these nerves:

Practice the ask in advance – think about what you want to say and how you want to present the opportunity to support. Then think about how you will respond to any questions or challenges that might come up. Take time to think about the different ways the conversation might go and how you will respond to each scenario.

Don't rush into the ask – there can be pressure to get to “the ask” as quickly as possible. After all, the financial year ends next week and there's still that gaping hole in your budget. But these factors shouldn't influence when you make the ask. You should only ask when you are confident that both you and the supporter are ready. Ask yourself:

- ⊗ Do you know enough about their motivations and capacity to offer them a proposition that will be attractive to them?
- ⊗ Is the supporter mentally ready to make a gift? Do they know all of the things they need to know about the organisation, the project and their gift?
- ⊗ Is the supporter emotionally ready to make a gift? Do they feel all of the things they need to feel about the organisation, the project and their gift?

Don't be afraid of “no” – sure, being told “no” is disappointing. But if you are asking the right people there will be some existing level of relationship with the organisation before you get to the ask. If, for whatever reason, they say “no” it's unlikely to be the end of the relationship. In fact, if you have cultivated them properly, the relationship will be stronger than it was before. This means there is more chance of them giving a gift when the time is right.

“Embarrassed to ask again”

“We asked people to donate last year and lots of people gave. We couldn't possibly ask them again this year.”

Why not?

Last year, lots of people signalled their love for (and commitment to) your organisation by making a gift. What makes you think they love you any less this year?

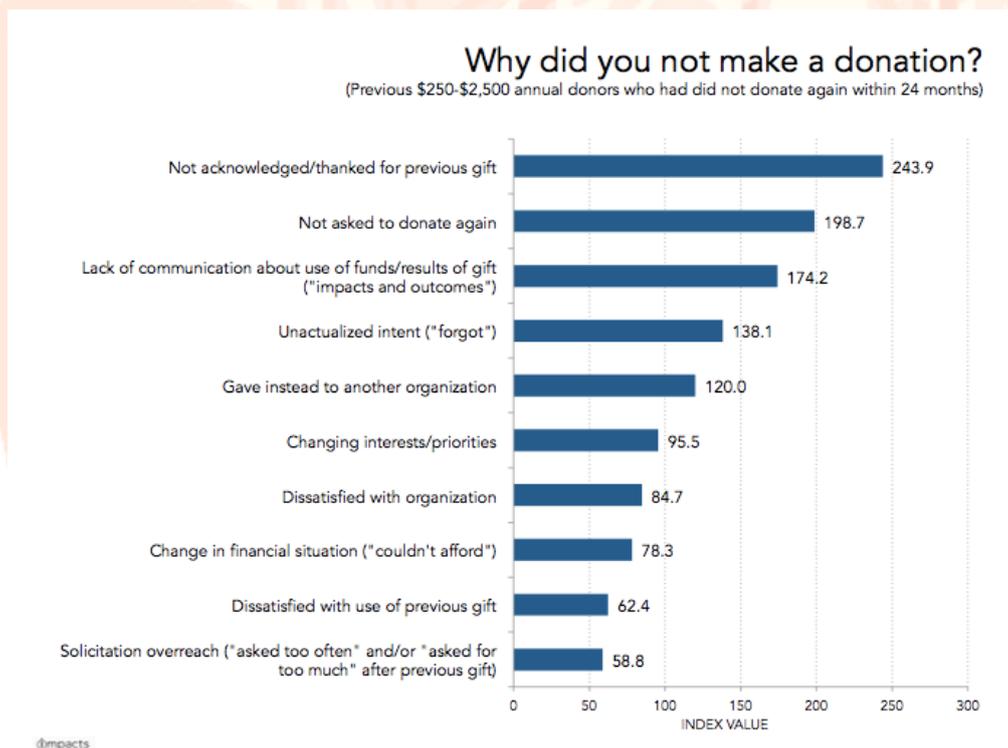
The question is, did you return the love? Did you thank them? Did you make them feel special and valued? Did you show them the impact of their gift?

In short, **did you give your supporters an enjoyable experience?**

The three most common reasons people have for not giving again having previously donated are:

- ④ "I wasn't thanked"
- ④ "I wasn't asked again"
- ④ "I wasn't shown the impact of my gift"

Being asked too often was a far less common concern – appearing right down in 10th in a survey of lapsed museum supporters.



Source: <https://www.colleendilen.com/2016/04/20/why-donors-stop-giving-money-to-cultural-organizations-data/>

In fundraising it is far more efficient to look after and retain your existing supporters than it is to constantly try and find new supporters.

If you don't ask the supporter to give again, you both lose out. You don't get the donation and the supporter loses out on the opportunity to help a cause they care about.

If their previous experience of supporting your work has been fantastic, why wouldn't they want to do it again?

Get the supporter experience right and giving again will be a pleasure, not a chore.



“Embarrassed to be chasing wealth”

“Fundraising is elitist and goes against our values as an organisation. We pride ourselves on being accessible for all. We should be focused on looking after our audiences, rather than focusing on donors. We can’t be seen to be selling out to rich people.”

This cause of embarrassment is best avoided by repeating the following mantra over and over again.

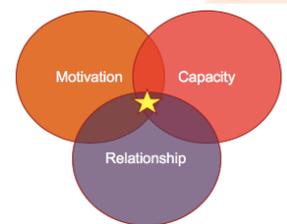
“Fundraising is not about the money!”

(You may wish to emphasise the point by flogging yourself. Or, better still, flogging the cursed victim...)

If you are identifying your fundraising prospects based on their wealth alone, something has gone horribly wrong.

People need to have three attributes to be considered prospects:

- ⊗ Motivation – a reason (or reasons) that motivate them to support your work
- ⊗ Relationship – a connection to your organisation, ranging from simple awareness to lifelong commitment
- ⊗ Capacity – the means to support your work



Too often, organisations think that Capacity is what matters the most.

It isn't.

Give me a room full of motivated, committed people over a room full of rich people any day.

This means that, for most arts and culture organisations, your supporters and prospects are your audience. They are not separate groups.

Instead of viewing it as “selling out to rich people”, start thinking about it as giving your most passionate, committed supporters the chance to build a deeper relationship with the organisation.

Then make sure you have opportunities for people to show their love for you, whatever their capacity to support.

“Embarrassed to seem needy”

“Asking for money will make people think the organisation is in trouble. If we talk too much about fundraising we will look desperate and needy. We have to look like everything is fine.”

Look around you. Is everything fine?

Your Arts Council and local authority funding are, at best, a real-term cut and, at worst, a very real cut. In return, you’ve told them you are going to deliver more work over the next four years while, at the same time, you’re somehow going to reduce your reliance on public subsidy. Material costs, overheads and venue fees seem to be going up by the day. Your Artistic Director is excitedly devising yet another new project while your Finance Manager looks like they’re about to have a nervous breakdown.

You desperately need help to bridge the ever-increasing gap between your ambitions and your budget.

But you can’t ask for help.

Because that would make you look desperate.



But why is being desperate such a bad thing?

Being desperate for funds means you need people to donate as soon as possible and that there will be unwanted consequences for your organisation and your beneficiaries if they don’t.

Unless people give, exhibitions or productions will be cancelled. Buildings will fade and crumble. Ambitions will be scaled back. People will miss out. Towns, cities and countries will be worse off.

If that’s not the reality of your organisation, **why are you fundraising?**

If there isn’t an urgent need for funds, why are you fundraising? If the work will happen even if people don’t give, why are you fundraising? If you can just as easily get the money in other ways, why are you fundraising?

However, if the ability to achieve your organisation's dream *does* rely on people donating, why aren't you shouting about it?

There are people out there who will help you but they need to know that you need help. This means that you need to be ok with being vulnerable. You need to stop pretending that you can do everything on your own. You need to stop pretending that everything is fine.

Rather than seeing fundraising as a sign or weakness, embrace it.

Embrace the fact that your organisation has a dream – something you want to achieve. Embrace the fact that there are people out there who share your dream. Embrace the fact that these people are prepared to go above and beyond to help you achieve your dream.

“Embarrassed to be competing with more deserving charities”

“We will look silly if we try and fundraise like proper charities. How can we possibly compete with them? Why would anybody give to us over cancer/sick children/cute puppies?”

Actually, I do agree with part of this. Arts organisations can't compete with the likes of Cancer Research, Oxfam or the RSPCA.

I mean, what are the chances of a theatre company finding a cure for cancer?

How likely is it that a local museum will have the skills or the time to end global poverty?

And how on earth is a symphony orchestra going to prevent cruelty to animals?

You can't possibly compete with these organisations because you're not playing the same game!

Different people give to different causes for different reasons.

Yes, there are probably more people in the world who feel more passionately about finding a cure for cancer than they do about your organisation's work.

And that's ok.

Because there are still people out there who are passionate about your work. The people who would be devastated if you closed and your work stopped. Stop focusing on the uninterested people outside. Start focusing on those closest to you who love what you do.

And remember - just because someone feels more passionate about one cause than another doesn't mean they won't support both. Very few people are in a monogamous relationship with just one charity or just one cause.

Still can't rid your organisation of the Curse of Embarrassment?

Reframing the way we think about fundraising, and our relationships with supporters, can help to lift the curse of embarrassment. Seeing the relationship through the supporters' eyes and thinking about what they get from it – and how good it feels to help – can turn embarrassment into excitement.

But some organisations are too far gone. The Curse is so deep-rooted that they will never change.

If this is true of your organisation there is only one thing you can do.

Leave. Get out. Run for your life. Don't look back.

No good can come from staying in an organisation that's embarrassed by fundraising. It will slowly suck away at your energy, passion and enthusiasm.

Go and find an organisation that embraces fundraising. They will be delighted to have you.

***Worried that your fundraising has been plagued by the Curse of Embarrassment?
Contact us today to see if we can help your organisation take pride in your fundraising!***



When Mary (aged 33) first joined the Generic Arts Organisation she could articulate their Case for Support in a powerful and emotive way. However, too much time in an organisation plagued by the Curse of Embarrassment has left her physically unable to ask for money. Doctors say that one more Gala dinner will kill her.



You can find more blogs and resources on the “Apollo’s Muse” section of our website:
www.ApolloFundraising.com/Apollo-Muse

What is stopping you from taking your fundraising to the next level?

Unsure about the steps you need to take? Worried that your team doesn’t have the skills or knowledge they need to be successful? Nervous about putting your plan into action?

We all need a helping hand from time to time. Apollo Fundraising can provide the support you need to achieve your fundraising goals.

We can help you *find your direction* – we’ve helped arts organisations write their first fundraising strategy, planned large-scale capital appeals and reviewed the strategies of successful teams looking to take their fundraising to the next level.

We can help you *improve your skills* – we’ve trained arts fundraisers, volunteers, board members and senior managers. We’ve provided training on topics such as making the ask, making the most of digital technology and setting up individual giving schemes.

We can help you *build your confidence* – we’ve coached theatres on approaching major donors, mentored visual arts organisations on launching crowdfunding campaigns and supported museums to put their fundraising plans into action.

Need a helping hand? Contact us today to see how we can support you!



www.ApolloFundraising.com

Email: David.Burgess@apollofundraising.com

Twitter: [@davidburgessfr](https://twitter.com/davidburgessfr)

[@Apollo_FR_](https://twitter.com/Apollo_FR)