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The Elements of 'Strategic Giving'

By Carol Thompson Cole

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The giving season is upon us. It is the time of year when most of us think about those in need. It is also when the pleas for support are loudest.

In this economic climate, those pleas are more urgent. Nonprofit organizations around the region report that demand for basic services has skyrocketed, sometimes in just a matter of weeks. Many people will be sacrificing in the months ahead, but those with the greatest need are being hit the hardest.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed and to respond solely from our hearts. Of course, giving starts with our passions and supporting the causes we care most about. But emotional giving alone isn't what's needed. We have to use our heads to make sure that what we do has the greatest impact and benefit. In the professional philanthropy world, it is called "strategic giving." What does it take to do it well?

- *Do Your Homework.* Find out which organizations are really making a difference in the areas you care about. Find out who the leaders are. Invest the time to meet them, learn how they approach their work and where they are steering the organization. Examine the programs closely -- look for evidence-based programs with track records of effectiveness. Push past the vignettes and emotional stories and ask the questions that help understand how many lives were improved, not just "touched". And finally look at what others are funding and ask them why.

- *Leverage your resources.* Look for opportunities to make your dollars go further. Giving circles are rising in popularity because they allow individuals to pool their philanthropic dollars to make larger gifts with greater impact. Allow your dollars to be used as a match grant to leverage additional funding.

- *Give your knowledge as well as your money.* Strategic giving isn't just about money but also about personal resources. Volunteering is good, but equal and sometimes greater value can be had by activating personal networks to raise visibility, help source new board members or talent, open doors for an organization or help forge partnerships.

- *Fund organizations, not just programs.* Nonprofits need strong backbones to survive in these tough times. They need strong talent and effective infrastructure that allows them to meet the needs and not collapse under the demand. Behind every effective program is a strong organization with talented leadership, staff and the tools needed to do its work.

- *Expect Results.* Keep track of how well the organization is doing. Probe deeply to see if it is achieving its goals. Ask for data and outcomes. Hold the organization accountable.

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- *Be Patient.* Social change doesn't happen overnight. Making a donation here and there isn't the best use of philanthropic dollars. Commit to organizations over the long haul.

Philanthropic dollars are a precious resource and become more so in times of crisis. We must all find ways to be more strategic in our giving, to blend the good intentions in our hearts with the reason in our minds so that nonprofits can do what they do best: help those in the greatest need.

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