Practice Guide

Adopting Community Centric Fundraising: Findings from a National Study

Maya Hemachandra, MPA, CFRE, and Elizabeth Dale, Ph.D.

APRIL 2025

Dorothy A. Johnson Center
FOR PHILANTHROPY

GRAND VALLEY
STATE UNIVERSITY

Introduction

"Community-Centric Fundraising is a fundraising model that is grounded in equity and social justice. We prioritize the entire community over individual organizations, foster a sense of belonging and interdependence, present our work not as individual transactions but holistically, and encourage mutual support between nonprofits."[1]

One of the key barriers that emerged from our 2025 national study, *Adopting Community-Centric Fundraising,* was that respondents from organizations interested in starting their adoption of Community-Centric Fundraising (CCF) principles felt overwhelmed: "Where do we start?," "What does change look like?," "How do I convince my organizational leadership that change is necessary?" This practice guide is meant to jumpstart that work. While there is no formula or one path organizations should take, the following questions, reflections, and examples are gleaned from our research, experience, and in fundraisers' reflective practice from those in the field who are actively moving in a CCF-aligned direction.

The *Adopting Community-Centric Fundraising* national study received survey responses from fundraising staff across a wide variety of organizations with all sizes of staff and budget, and in communities across the U.S. The fundraisers who responded shared detailed information in their survey comments and in 14 in-depth interviews, giving us copious examples of CCF adoption across a range of activities. This practice guide attempts to distill those lessons into actionable steps for fundraising leaders and development teams to integrate into their work.

We are grateful to the hundreds of survey participants and 14 individuals who shared such information so generously, and to Alice Farrer, our Seattle University graduate student, who walked side-by-side with us to make sense of all the data. We also want to thank the CCF Global Council, AFP Foundations for Philanthropy, the Dorothy A. Johnson Center at Grand Valley State University, and all of our distribution partners for making this research possible.

For further data on the overall impact and magnitude of national adoption, please see the full 2025 report, *Adopting Community-Centric Fundraising: Findings from a National Study,* at https://johnsoncenter.org/resource/report-adopting-community-centric-fundraising/.

---

[1] Community-Centric Fundraising (CCF). (2024). Homepage. https://communitycentricfundraising.org/

Part 1: Building the Case for Change

Change is hard, especially when past efforts appear successful on the surface – like meeting annual fundraising goals – and philanthropy, a crucial source of revenue for most nonprofits, is put at risk. Before you begin the work of organizational change, it can be helpful to create a clear picture of the current state of your nonprofit. The first step to adopting a CCF-aligned fundraising approach is to ground your desire for change in your team's, organization's, and community's values. We recommend beginning with a review of and reflection on your organization's existing documentation.

Action Step 1: Review Your Organization's Existing Documentation

- Organization's target service audience(s)
- Organizational mission, vision, and values statements
- Organizational commitments to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Access and Justice
- Current strategic plans, theory of change, and annual goals
- Feedback from fellow staff, volunteers, donors, and partners

Reflection Questions

- What do these documents say about how members of your organization should interact with the community you serve?
- What groups are centered in these statements?
- What must be true for your organization to achieve the goals it has envisioned?
- Is there agreement between all the organization's departments or units on what "living your mission" looks like?
- Are the board and staff aligned on mission, vision, and values? If not, where is there disconnection?
- How can you use CCF principles to draw teams together or build shared understanding across your organization?

Framing potential changes to fundraising, storytelling, and other key processes in terms of shared organizational values gives context to why they are necessary and reduces potential pushback. For example, one fundraiser described a two-month process their organization undertook to develop fundraising principles that align with the organization's values and CCF, ensuring every fundraising decision (i.e., donor outreach, campaign designs, the gift acceptance policy, etc.) adheres to their guiding principles:

> The intention was, everything that we do, fundraising-wise, should come back to this and be aligned with these principles. And that's our litmus test — if it feels off, and we're straying away from this, then we need to go back to the drawing board.

As the final part of evaluating the current state of your organization, review your work in the context of the *CCF Aligned Actions List.*[2] Perhaps there are activities you have already started as part of broader equity and inclusion initiatives that can serve as a springboard for future work.

Action Step 2: Evaluate the Current State of Your Organization

- Review the CCF Aligned Action List to determine progress thus far and areas for growth.
- Assess your organization's readiness for change. This includes:
  - The board's composition and board members' understanding of community-centered principles
  - Funding sources and revenue mix
  - Organizational decision-making hierarchy and processes
  - Other change initiatives in process

Reflection Questions

- Where are we already making progress in the CCF Aligned Actions List?
- Which processes or policies feel most urgent to address?
- Who will be most impacted by proposed changes? How will we get their input?
- Who gets to make decisions on these changes? What information will they need to say "yes"?
- What barriers are we likely to face? Who are our likely allies?
- What budget or resources can we access to support these changes?
- What is the potential impact to our revenue? Which relationships do we need to reexamine to support this work?
- Does this work dovetail with other change initiatives that are already active?
- How can you use CCF principles to draw teams together or build shared understanding across your organization?

Once you have completed this baseline assessment, select a place to start. Survey respondents shared that they often began with one or two areas that felt the most pressing. Once those areas were addressed, they had often completed the necessary preliminary conversations and built the momentum needed to gain approval for additional changes.

---

[2] See the CCF Aligned Action List, by CCF, at https://communitycentricfundraising.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CCF_Aligned_Actions_List.pdf

For example, the fundraising budget is often the least restricted money in an organization. To show solidarity, the fundraising team at one organization used a portion of their event budget to contribute to a nonprofit supporting the local Indigenous Tribe. This moved their event program's land acknowledgement from a performative statement to a values-aligned action.

Once you have identified areas for improvement, the next part is to set goals to hold yourself and your team accountable. Be as concrete as possible — the more detail you can envision, the more likely your team is to achieve the desired results.

Action Step 3: Set Measurable Goals to Work on Specific Policies or Practices that are Shared Among the Entire Fundraising Team.

Reflection Questions

- What does success look like?
- Who will be impacted by these changes?
- How will we gain their input and support?
- How will we make decisions as a group? Will we look for consensus, majority vote, or unanimous agreement?

Once you have decided on specific and measurable goals, create a timeline and action plan to hold yourself accountable. One suggestion that emerged from our research is to incorporate CCF discussions and learning into regular team meetings. Additionally, make space for your team to check in on progress regularly. What barriers are you coming up against? What is working well? Be cognizant of dominant norms of urgency and perfectionism by giving this change the time it needs.[3] Recognize small wins and iterate to reach the desired outcomes. Consider when you should gain input from the community you are serving, including program participants, volunteers, donors, and funders to help inform your actions.

---

[3] See Okun, T., White Supremacy Culture. https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture_2020.pdf

Tip! Don't do it alone! Our research showed that there are nonprofits everywhere that are working on adopting a more Community-Centric Fundraising approach. Gain ideas and support from the CCF Global Community via the CCF Hub, Community Channels, Local CCF Chapters, and other organizations doing this work.

Part 2: Learning from Community

While the CCF website and "hub" have published numerous essays and articles written by fundraisers involved in this work, many examples of changes that were successfully implemented by fundraisers over the past few years emerged during our research. Here are a few highlighted examples.

Storytelling

Authentic storytelling is a key aspect of Community-Centric Fundraising and can be exercised in multiple ways to ensure those stories are effective and ethical. One key tenet of CCF is providing stakeholders, be they participants, community members, or donors, full agency over their narratives. Centering authenticity in storytelling fosters trust, representation, and honesty, allowing communities to tell their stories without being filtered through a donor-centric lens.

> A fundraiser shared how it took them years of convincing leadership for their organization to shift away from editing scholarship recipients' speeches at events: "I think their speech should be their own words and what they want to say. […] It's their story." Editing and re-wording the experiences of others for the benefit of the organization's branding or perceived ideal of someone in "need" is simply not worth the harm it causes in altering someone's story. As the fundraiser said, "How would you feel if somebody changed your words? It's not okay to do it."

Further, the language we use is a reflection of our values and can have the ability to perpetuate harmful power dynamics. Maintaining consistency using asset-based and person-first language is central to shifting the narrative around equality and values-aligned storytelling.

> One fundraiser shared how their organization is intentionally shifting its language away from identity-first terms like "those in need" or "the homeless" which uphold existing power imbalances

and focus on deficits. Instead, this fundraiser's organization is choosing language that centers dignity and collective action: "Together, we can address these issues," they emphasized, recognizing that true change comes from collaboration.

Events

When it comes to aligning fundraising events with CCF values and principles, organizations are reevaluating their accessibility, inclusivity, and trauma-informed practices. By questioning existing fundraising norms and expanding their ideas around what events could be successful, organizations can re-orientate their perspective and create greater focus on the community they serve.

> One organization prioritized accessibility at their events. They now provide live captioning at all events, multilingual signage, and embedded captions in videos they share. This organization primarily serves communities of people experiencing homelessness, many of whom have experienced substance use disorder, and they have also begun de-center alcohol at events. The participant stressed, "I think it's partly problematic in terms of inebriating people to get them to donate. And also, partly because there's a lot of folks that we serve that have experienced substance use disorder or are familiar with those who have, and that could be a trigger for folks."

Another shift includes rethinking the traditional "raise the paddle" donation format to center donor inclusivity and the needs of the community.

> One fundraiser shared that they decided to "really lean into pre-event donations, and at the event, we just make a simple ask. People can donate, they can not, but no one will know at what level people gave, or if they gave it all." This approach to giving fosters a more equitable and welcoming environment for all donors.

Other organizations are rethinking traditional sponsorship funding structures to be more inclusive and accessible. Current sponsorship models often exclude the participation of small businesses and grassroots organizations that have limited discretionary budgets, reinforcing classism by prioritizing wealth over community engagement.

> One organization made a creative shift in their gala sponsorship model to become more flexible and accessible with suggested giving ranges and similar benefits regardless of the amount given. "We started by suggesting giving $250, which was the first package from $250 to $499. And if you're a small business or a BIPOC-led business or a small nonprofit, this is what your suggested giving would be. Then we did $500 to $2,500 and then $2,500 to $5,000." This shift allowed more community members to participate at levels that felt attainable and meaningful, reinforcing the CCF philosophy that philanthropy is not just for large donors, but for everyone invested in the organization's mission. In the end, the organization also raised more money from a greater number of sponsors, making the event successful in terms of revenue and CCF alignment.

Incorporating CCF principles into organization events can mean rethinking access and participation at events. Participants shared how they are changing fundraising practices to go beyond transactional, one-time gifts like ticket purchases, buying auction items, and raise-the-paddle donations, to long-term giving and partnership with the organization. They are taking creative approaches to make events more accessible to donors who otherwise are not able to attend, increasing community participation and strengthening relationships with new donors.

> One fundraiser shared how their organization has integrated monthly giving into their event pricing. Rather than requiring a one-time $75 ticket cost, the organization offered attendees the choice to

become monthly donors at $10 or more and gain free entry to the event. "By doing this, we're trying to attract a wider swath of donors that otherwise might not be able to attend these events," they emphasized. This organization also restructured its sponsorship benefits to prioritize community inclusion stating, "If you buy a $10,000 sponsorship, you are sponsoring 10 people that otherwise can't afford to attend this event. We're reaching more people in the community, providing more opportunities, and it's a benefit to you without [it] being of any cost to us."

Another organization used its values to rethink event expectations for staff and board members. It flipped conventional roles at its events — now staff members engage with attendees and build relationships with donors, while board members take on operational roles like working at registration, staffing the bar, or managing the silent auction.

Inclusive Giving Models

One critique of CCF is the misguided notion that the approach devalues donors and funders. The reality is that to do CCF well, donors and funders need to be treated as true partners, with mutuality and reciprocity at the center of relationships. Study participants shared how they are integrating education, activism, and donor responsibility to create a new mission-driven fundraising model.

One organization developed a Partners in Equity program — an individual monthly giving initiative rooted in the principles Give, Learn, and Act to deepen engagement with their community. Donors at any level, even $1 a month, are invited to virtual meetings, conversations, and staff interactions to learn about the organization's shift from a racial-equity-focused model to an anti-racist stance. "It's important to keep stakeholders informed," they said. "Saying out loud that you are anti-racist is bold, and it is a promise to the community that we wanted to be sure that folks were holding us accountable to." In addition to financial support and learning opportunities, the Partners in Equity program emphasizes action by encouraging donors to register to vote, contact legislators, and engage in advocacy efforts aligned with the organization. This model has proven financially successful, with the organization raising more through their engagement-driven model than via previous direct mail appeals.

Organizational Leadership

Board members hold influential positions in nonprofits and can significantly impact how an organization decides on and enacts its values and principles. Conversations about what kind of board an organization wants to have are an imperative process in deciding whether wealth or community representation should be prioritized. Many organizations evaluate their board composition to look for a mix of skill sets and corporate representation. Community-centered organizations look beyond these categories to consider how the communities they serve have representation on the board. Aligning board structures with CCF may require questioning and rethinking long-standing norms, such as mandatory board giving, meeting times and structures, or standard recruitment practices.

One fundraiser shared that their team evaluated the questions, "[Do] we want a board with deep pockets? Or do we want a board that's reflective of our community that might not be able to give large checks, but gives something meaningful? We landed in the latter."

One organization reviewed its mandatory board giving under an anti-racist lens and decided to end the requirement of 100% board giving.

Taking a more inclusive approach to board leadership also means shifting expectations about the board's role in financial crises.

> After layoffs at one organization, staff members questioned whether the board could provide major donations to help fill their funding gap. The response was clear: "That's not our board, that's not the choice we made," said one fundraiser. The conversation that followed was difficult, yet necessary, and reaffirmed the organization's commitment to its values and CCF as a whole. As the fundraiser reflected, "It was hard, but it was great to talk about it and tie it back to these values and principles [...] we're not betraying that. At the end of the day, we can say we're honest with ourselves." By prioritizing honesty, commitment to community, and alignment with CCF principles, organizations have the opportunity to build boards that contribute in meaningful ways, even if their financial capacity is more limited.

Another shift we are seeing is a rise in "open application calls" for board roles. This approach makes board recruitment more transparent and invites community members with skills, networks, and connections to apply who might be overlooked in traditional processes and within an organization's existing networks.

Sharing Resources with Other Nonprofits

A core principle of CCF is encouraging nonprofits to move beyond competition as individual organizations and adopt resource-sharing as a way to collectively strengthen the entire sector. Fostering collaboration through sharing knowledge and even funding ensures no singular organization is receiving the majority of available resources and instead acknowledges that we work in a broader ecosystem and for the benefit of the broader community.

> One practitioner discussed how their organization distributed surplus donations, like the 20,000 pairs of Bombas socks they received, to smaller organizations: "I am always offering anything that [our organization] has to small[er] organizations." They are also in the process of sharing grant writing resources with other organizations that may not have staff with that experience.

Other organizations are thinking critically about which funding opportunities they pursue. By prioritizing funding aligned with their values and mission, they might pass on pursuing opportunities better suited to other agencies. By shifting to a community-focused approach, organizations can maintain financial stability while upholding their responsibility to the larger nonprofit sector. This ensures that funding opportunities are prioritized to organizations that often face funding barriers, such as BIPOC-led nonprofits, grassroots, and community-led organizations.

> One interviewee said, "We try to live out the principles of good partnership and say, to the funder, [while] that makes a big impact for us, if you give money to this other group, it could have a real impact there. It's about letting opportunities pass us by strategically without impairing our own ability to do our work. And so that is where we try to be a good community-centric organization." While they have passed on some funding opportunities, their donors have responded positively to the shift in grant seeking/fundraising. "I think we should just let that go. We do not have to scoop up every penny, every dime, every dollar if it's not going to affect our bottom line," they said.

Part 3: Resources

Below is a curated list of resources that can help you and your organization take the next step in your work toward a Community-Centric Fundraising approach.

Community-Centric Fundraising

CCF Global Homepage

CCF's 10 Principles

CCF Aligned Actions List

The Hub

Culture and Decision-Making

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture adapted from "white supremacy culture" by Tema Okun

Inclusive Language Guide from Oxfam International

Accessible Fundraising Toolkit from AFP Global

Consensus Decision Making: A Short Guide from Seeds for Change

The RAPID Decision-Making Framework from The Bridgespan Group

Using Decision Criteria to Improve Nonprofit Program Choices from The Bridgespan Group

Race Forward

Building Movement Project

Blogs and Podcasts

Nonprofit AF by Vu Le

Crappy Funding Practices by Vu Le

Ethical Rainmaker podcast by Michelle Shireen Muri

Beyond Fundraising podcast from Monique Curry-Mims & Valerie Johnson

Break Fake Rules podcast by Stupski Foundation's Glen Galaich and guests

Philanthropy and Equity

Decolonizing Wealth Project

Language & Learning Resource for Non-Indigenous People by Native Americans in Philanthropy

Resource Generation

Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens

Participatory Grantmaking Collection from National Center for Family Philanthropy

Stifled Generosity by Justice Funders