

ROADMAP SERIES: NETWORKING AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FUNDERS

AKHILA RAJESHWAR

April 23, 2020

Akhila Rajeshwar is the Executive Director of TiE Chennai. She has decades of experience working in the corporate sector, including as the CCO of a city hospital. In her present role, she has led TiE Chennai towards successfully securing the Best TiE Global Chapter Award (2018-19). She is the perfect mentor to budding social sector organisations looking to make their presence felt among funders.

Akhila Rajeshwar started the session by broadly outlining the ways in which non profits can build a relationship with funders. The critical factor of “trust building” was the major theme of her session, as she reiterated how trust formed the foundation for all relationship building. She drew on the methods used by TiE Chennai with regard to communicating with funders/ sponsors. As TiE Chennai’s motto is “Serve First and Scale Next” the main focus is that even before asking funders for anything, they focus on how they can help and serve their donors and members. They believe that providing help for their donors is the perfect way to keep in touch with them and associate with them. For example, if the donor is an entrepreneurial community, TiE helps them with idea validation, coming up with their business plan, business model canvas, mentor connects etc. Staying on top of the minds of the people we engage with is extremely important before approaching them with funding needs. TiE Chennai’s aim in that regard is to build a relationship and brand recall to such an extent that it is automatically the first thing that comes to mind in relation to the term entrepreneurship.

Akhila also emphasised the need for going above and beyond. She pointed to how it is important to go the extra mile to serve funders/ sponsors. Irrespective of the outcome of the relationship for the organisation, making sure that you do whatever it takes to help your donors and members/beneficiaries ensures that you are on top of their mind. This in turn helps in building trust and loyalty among the funders. Similarly it is important to make sure that they get value out of their relationship with your organisation and come back for any sort of services. Once the trust is built, they would eventually come to your organisation for every service. Even if you are not capable of carrying out the services yourself, connecting them to others, helping them in reaching out to others who may be able to help them are ways by which you can show that you are putting extra effort to fulfill their needs.

Another key factor to improving communication with funders is staying connected with them. We have to make sure that we are constantly communicating with them and asking them if they need any help or services. Organisations should not make the mistake of waiting for their donors to initiate communication and approaching them only at the time of funding requirements. It is important to keep in touch with them and ask them what they need frequently to be on top of their mind. In order to do this, even small things matter. For example, remembering their birthday or their organisation's anniversary can be very helpful in staying connected. In this way they will understand that the organisation is genuine and reliable. This would also bring a personal touch to the communication.

Akhila also stressed on how it is always important to keep the person in front of us at the centre of any communication and listen to their need rather than to be focused on asking what we need. It is important to listen and be present fully in all communication, and all communication must be as clear and crisp as possible. A common mistake that many of us make is that, during the conversation, we tend to stop listening and start thinking about the next thing to say or how to respond. This may in turn lead to nervousness and inability to convey the need properly. Therefore it is important to simply listen to the donor and understand what they need.

With respect to clear communication, Akhila mentioned how this clarity is very important when going to donors with asks. When talking about what you need, organisations need to be upfront in telling donors what it is that they want from them. Until and unless you tell them what you need, they will not be able to help. You must take care to not be overly concerned by what others would think or their judgement on your asks. The communication should be clear but not demanding. It is also a good practice to tell them what is the benefit in it for them so that it helps in capturing their attention and moving forward with the conversation. Clarity is the key in good communication.

Finally, Akhila concluded by noting how relationships with human individuals, whether it is friends, family, funders, sponsors, members are all important. Human interaction is important in building relationships. The focus has to be building those relationships whether they are funders or not. It is not ideal to only look at them as funders/sponsors when building relationships. Constant interactions can create good relationships and these interactions will lead to trust which is more important than receiving money.

Question Answer Session

1. What are the service offerings of TiE Chennai for social sector organisations?

There are several entrepreneurs who work in social sector and are part of TiE Chennai. TiE also has social sector special interest group where these social entrepreneurs come together and discuss ideas, exchange notes, network etc. TiE also offers mentorship, help in idea validation, taking ideas to execution level etc. TiE is also planning on coming up with directory of entrepreneurs which includes all sectors. However it was very difficult to collect information therefore the plan is still in progress.

2. How do you keep funders from dictating/ opposing themselves into the discission making while holding the money as basis for the entitlement to make discission related to your organisation?

The capacity to negotiate with donors depends entirely on the trust and relationship with the funders. At TiE, we have said no to donors if it was required. If an organisation is principle centric and very strong about the values they follow, they should be able to say no and over a period of time people will understand what are the ethics and ethos of the organisation. It may be a difficult decision to take but others will understand that your organisation is consistent, and value centric. This eventually circles back to trust and relationship building with the right people. Once the relationship is cemented, then there is capacity for some liberty of decision making.

3. Fuders are often quiet rigid with regard to what they are willing to fund espcially with regard to CSR. How do you suggest we build these relations when there is often power or rigidity to take into account?

The ability to build a relation essentially boils down to doing nice things for the other party. Even if the donor may hold the power, or be rigid, as an organisation you can offer your help, be visible in other areas in their periphery so that they notice your work at some point and then start building the trust and relationship. It is also important to look at the situation from the funder's point of view as well. They might have reasons for their rigidity. It is important to take these into account and do things that will build their trust, and get their attention and appreciation. There are several methods/ approach that can be taken to establish these relationships. Simple phone calls, message and proactively approaching them to ask if they need any help all form part of this.