

# Are Your Money Beliefs Sabotaging Your Fundraising Success?

By Amy Varga

*What if you can't teach people to fundraise by teaching them how to fundraise?*

*What if learning the how-tos, the what-to-dos and the why-to-dos of fundraising isn't enough?*

*What if, after all that, people still don't want to do it?*

Those ambivalent feelings you—or your executive director and board members—have about fundraising often go back to beliefs about money and beliefs about people who have money.

For more than 20 years, I've been talking with people about the connection between money beliefs and feelings about

fundraising. It's a complicated topic for most fundraisers, and there aren't many places to explore what's really going on.

When I'm coaching a leader through their ambivalence around fundraising, the biggest mystery to solve is often this: Why do you feel uncomfortable fundraising even when you deeply believe in the cause you're raising money for?

WHY CAN YOU FEEL  
UNCOMFORTABLE FUNDRAISING  
EVEN WHEN YOU DEEPLY  
BELIEVE IN THE CAUSE YOU ARE  
RAISING MONEY FOR?



**Maybe fundraising isn't  
just about asking.**

**Maybe it's also about  
learning how to receive.**

---

## WHAT DID YOU LEARN ABOUT MONEY GROWING UP?

---

Every person has had his or her relationship with money shaped by personal experiences—and too often we haven't examined what we've learned.

Each of us—no matter how much or how little money you had growing up—was taught how to think and feel about money. Most of the time, the lessons you were taught about money were taught indirectly. It takes some work to understand and unpack the money beliefs you learned.

**You can start by exploring the answers to these prompts:**

1. Growing up, I learned that money \_\_\_\_\_.
2. People with money are \_\_\_\_\_.
3. I would have more money if \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Money makes people \_\_\_\_\_.
5. My dad thought money was \_\_\_\_\_.
6. My mom thought money was \_\_\_\_\_.
7. My first job was \_\_\_\_\_, and I used the money to \_\_\_\_\_.
8. Talking about money makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.
9. If I had more money, I'm afraid I would \_\_\_\_\_.
10. If I could afford it, I would \_\_\_\_\_.
11. When someone asks me for money, I feel \_\_\_\_\_.
12. What does the word "money" conjure up for you?  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. In my family, money always caused \_\_\_\_\_.
14. If I weren't so cheap, I would \_\_\_\_\_.
15. When I have money, I usually \_\_\_\_\_.
16. Not being able to afford something makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.
17. Being around people with more money than me makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.
18. Being around people with less money than me makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_.
19. What else do I know about money as a result of the life I've lived so far? \_\_\_\_\_

---

## EACH OF US LEARNED SOME VERSION OF THE SCARCITY MINDSET

---

Regardless of how much money you were raised with, you probably learned some version of the scarcity mindset. This is a set of ideas based around the notion that there's not enough of the pie to go around.

The scarcity mindset can sound like this when it comes to fundraising:

- "There's not enough [money, time, resources, or staff]."
- "If we had more donors, we would be better off."
- "We will never get the grants that organization gets."
- "That other capital campaign is going to crush our hopes of succeeding in ours."

And it's not just the fundraising team that can fall into scarcity thinking. Your organization and the nonprofit sector as a whole tend to cultivate a scarcity mindset. But there's another way. You can question what you learned. You can ask whether it's really serving you. You can instead opt for an abundance mindset.

The best fundraisers are optimistic and hopeful. They believe a different world is possible. That there is enough to go around. That things can change. The best fundraisers are always focused on abundance and possibility.

---

## HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT ASKING FOR AND RECEIVING HELP?

---

Your relationship with money and your feelings about fundraising are also impacted by your feelings about asking for help. For a second, don't think about fundraising. Think generally about asking for help, receiving help and giving help.

- How do you feel when you need to ask for help?
- How do you feel when you have the opportunity to give help?
- How do you feel when you receive help?

If you're like most people, you don't like having to ask for or receive help. It might be because when you're on the asking and receiving sides of things, you feel vulnerable, dependent and powerless. And the opposite is true when you're on the giving side. When it comes to giving help, you probably feel differently. You probably feel really good when you're able to help someone.

Fundraising can trigger your inclination to want to be independent—and your negative feelings around dependency and vulnerability. But the reality is that being human means you are interdependent. No one can survive and thrive on their own. None of your work can be accomplished without the support of others. And when you ask for and receive help, you are also offering someone the opportunity to give help, which feels really good to the person you asked.

**The best fundraisers are  
always about**  
*abundance and possibility.*

**The best fundraisers are**  
*optimistic and hopeful.*

**They believe a different world  
is possible. That there is  
enough to go around.**

Maybe fundraising isn't just about asking. Maybe it's also about learning how to receive. About learning to be grateful. About seeing yourself and your organization as equals and offering people opportunities to get involved and make a difference.

## HOW DO YOU (REALLY) FEEL ABOUT PEOPLE WITH MONEY?

Connected to your feelings about money is how you feel about people who have money. Often, those money beliefs you learned growing up included messages about people who had more money than you did.

You hear all the time that fundraising is about relationships. But how can you build a real relationship with someone you resent or mistrust? How can you build authentic, real relationships with donors when, on another level, you are deeply ambivalent or even inwardly hostile toward them?

When you haven't fully examined your relationship and history with money, you can often project feelings, assumptions and stereotypes onto people who have more money than you.

Isn't it curious how you can be so committed to keeping humanity at the center of your language and relationships with clients and those you serve—and then throw that out the window when it comes to talking about your donors? I'm referring to using language like "those people," "ladies who lunch," "the country club set," "rich people," "fat cats," "they're loaded," and "the one percent" to describe donors.



## What did you learn about money growing up?

When you really stop to think about it, what do you really know about your donors? I mean as people, not just check-writers. Do you know what they really care about—not related to your work, but to theirs? What are they worried about? What keeps them up at night? Do you know what their money baggage is? Because guess what? They have it too.

## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Until you explore your relationship with money, you can't be a fully effective fundraiser. It's the most overlooked and underexamined barrier holding your fundraising back. Left unexplored, your money beliefs keep you from fully embracing fundraising and building authentic and meaningful relationships with your donors—the kind of relationships based on partnership and interdependence, not transactions and money. In the end, it's all about you knowing yourself, taking responsibility for what you feel and believe and deciding how you want to show up in your fundraising. 🗨️



Amy Varga is a fundraising trainer, coach and consultant and has been involved with fundraising for over 22 years. With her team at The Varga Group ([www.thevargagroup.com](http://www.thevargagroup.com)), she has guided more than 100 nonprofit clients in raising millions of dollars with comprehensive consulting services

in capital campaign counsel (including feasibility studies, case development, and donor analytics), fundraising training, retreat facilitation, board development and leadership coaching.