



Guest commentary: Nonprofits don't have a donor problem, they have a clarity problem

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By Eric Knight

Nonprofits are part of the Central Coast's civic and economic infrastructure — delivering healthcare, food security, housing support, education and environmental protection in communities throughout the region. The people leading these organizations are among the most mission-driven professionals in our economy.

Yet many nonprofit leaders are operating inside systems that make their work far harder than it should be.

Recently, I read a national report on donor behavior that contained a striking statistic: nearly everyone who begins the online giving process intends to donate, yet more than half never complete the gift.

The report correctly identifies some of the friction points — too many steps, confusing choices and unnecessary complexity in the giving process.

But the solutions it proposes are the usual ones: improve messaging, refine campaigns, optimize donation forms.

Increasingly, another recommendation appears as well — bring artificial intelligence into donor communications.

AI may absolutely have a role to play. Used well — particularly upstream, in the decision environment long before donor communications ever occur — it has the potential to strengthen nonprofit organizations in meaningful ways.

But outsourcing donor relationships to automated systems risks misunderstanding the real challenge.

The deeper issue facing many nonprofits today is not donor motivation. People still want to give.

The deeper issue is system complexity.

Nonprofit leaders face the same constraint that business leaders do not have enough money or time. Yet the systems designed to help fundraisers raise money often make the time problem worse.

Business leaders should pay attention to this challenge as well. Nonprofits are not just charitable organizations — they are part of the region's civic and economic infrastructure. They provide services that stabilize communities, support the workforce and strengthen the quality of life that attracts businesses and talent to the Central Coast.

Fundraisers today are expected to manage donor databases, interpret dashboards, run campaigns, steward relationships, track engagement metrics and produce constant reporting for boards and stakeholders.

Each system produces more data, more charts and more dashboards — but rarely clearer direction.

The result is that highly capable professionals spend enormous amounts of time managing tools instead of focusing on the relationships and decisions that actually generate revenue.

In theory, technology should have made fundraising dramatically easier.

In practice, many organizations now operate inside a maze of fragmented tools that require constant interpretation.

Most systems answer questions like: What happened? What was opened? Which campaign performed best?

But they rarely answer the question nonprofit leaders most need answered:

What should we do next?

In complex systems, clarity is not a luxury. It is infrastructure.

When clarity is missing, organizations become reactive. Staff spend more time interpreting reports than engaging donors. Opportunities for connection are missed. Burnout rises. Revenue that could support community services quietly disappears.

When clarity exists, the opposite happens. Fundraisers know where to focus. Donor relationships deepen. Decisions happen faster. Staff and leaders have the time and energy to do what they do best — and they flourish instead of burning out. Resources flow toward the actions most likely to strengthen the organization.

Artificial intelligence may play a role in this future. But the most powerful uses of AI in fundraising may not be the ones speaking to donors.

They may happen upstream — inside the decision environment where leaders determine who to prioritize, where to focus and how to deploy their limited time.

This is why nonprofit organizational health should matter to business leaders as well.

Healthy nonprofit organizations strengthen regional economies. They stabilize communities, deliver essential services and support the workforce that local businesses rely on.

Later this month, leaders from the Los Angeles, Ventura County and Santa Barbara County region will gather to explore this idea together — how strengthening the internal health of nonprofit organizations can strengthen the communities they serve.

But this conversation cannot stop with nonprofit leaders alone. Board members, funders and business leaders should begin asking a simple question of the organizations they support: Do the systems inside this organization create clarity — or complexity?

Because when nonprofit leaders are buried in dashboards, reports and fragmented tools, they lose the one resource they can never replace: time.

And when organizations regain clarity, something powerful happens.

Staff focuses on relationships instead of reports. Donors receive a genuine human connection. And the organizations our communities depend on become stronger, more resilient institutions.

In complex systems, clarity is infrastructure. The sooner we start treating it that way, the stronger our communities will be.

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