

The Art of Possibility

AUTHOR: Chris McLeod, Columnist



Chris McLeod is Executive Director of The Greater Charlotte Cultural Trust, a supporting foundation of Foundation For The Carolinas and ASC. An attorney with fifteen years of fundraising experience, Chris works with the ASC and its 24 cultural partners and their donors to build endowments through planned giving. Chris also serves as Chair for Leave A Legacy-Charlotte Region, a public awareness campaign dedicated to promoting the idea that everyone is capable of leaving a charitable bequest.

Given the challenging times in our community, it is understandable that businesses and nonprofits alike are focusing on cutting costs, trying to do more with fewer staff and struggling for survival. For a city whose growth and greatness was fueled by her fearless leaders and "possibility" thinking, it is no surprise that Charlotte finds herself at a crossroads, questioning who she is and what her future looks like. Like many of us who've faced personal or professional crises, Charlotte needs to be reminded that how we respond to the crisis will make an important difference in our future.

One Saturday morning I was inspired to imagine what nonprofit leaders can do to achieve breakthrough performance and inspire individual donors to make significant gifts to our leading nonprofits.

- What are the attitudes, feelings, experiences and worldview we must embrace to become everything we want to be as a vibrant and caring community?
- What do we need to do to inspire our donors to give joyfully?
- How do we inspire a breakthrough performance and reveal the most generous expression of support for the arts, the homeless and the children in Charlotte?

One example of this possibility thinking among a group of nonprofit leaders is *The Institute for Philanthropic Leadership* and its inaugural program, *The Major Gift School*. An eight-day leadership program, *The Major Gift School* is designed to teach nonprofit leaders how to cultivate individual donors. Charlotte's nonprofits are disproportionately reliant on giving by corporations, which nationally only accounts for 4 percent of all charitable contributions, according to Giving USA. Since individuals make more than 74 percent of all charitable contributions (85 percent if you count bequests), this concept emerged to teach nonprofit leaders how to fish in deeper waters.

The notion of what is required for breakthrough performance came to me after reading *The Art of Possibility* by Ben Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic. In his book, Zander shares his experience of teaching graduate music students at the New England Conservatory. The class is an exploration of musical performance and the psychological and emotional factors that often stand in the way of great music making. Zander's goal is to help these very talented students make major breakthroughs in their music and their lives.

After 25 years of teaching, Zander had grown frustrated with students' unwillingness to take risks, which he believed was due in part to anxiety over the measurement of their performance and desire to get an A. Zander recognized that the primary role of grades was to compare one student against another, not inspire breakthrough performances in the lives and musical performance of students.

Zander began experimenting with a practice that he refers to as "Giving an A." On the first day of class, he tells his students that each will receive an "A", explaining that the only requirement is that each student write him a letter during the first two weeks of class outlining what she or he will do over the course of the year to achieve a breakthrough performance. The letter must be written in the past tense and dated eight months from the first day of class. Zander exhorts his students to answer the question, "What are the attitudes, feelings and worldview of the person who will have done all you wished to do or become everything you wanted to be?"

Fast forward five years. Charlotte is a truly a thriving and growing cultural community because we've built upon our history and heritage as a New South City. We've discovered that some of the 250,000 newcomers to Charlotte served on boards of outstanding arts organizations in other major cities and we've invited them to join our boards. Because we learned how to inspire joyful giving, our donors are passionately engaged and board giving is at an all time high. Charlotte is nationally known for having the highest percentage of citizens who leave a charitable bequest.

By focusing on Charlotte's strengths as a strong faith community, our national reputation for volunteerism and teaching nonprofit leaders how to inspire joyful giving, we believe we can achieve a breakthrough performance for our community.

Thank you, Mr. Zander, for reminding us what has made Charlotte a great city. Let's get started.

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Comments

NAME: Michael J. Solender DATE: Apr 17 2010 3:15PM

I love the concept of "joyful" giving. To me, this connotes the knowledge that the giver has that their contributions will be used in such a way as to have great impact. Volunteers give of their time, talent and money to efforts that in their view promote the breakthrough performance you speak of. WE are inspired when we see and feel tangible results from our giving. Part of the question that needs to be answered by nonprofits and donors alike is how are results measured, communicated and tied to additional efforts that can build on success. Given economic realities of the present it would seem that there are more opportunities for cross organization collaboration, economies of scale and sharing precious resources to get the most from all our efforts. Passion does not unfortunately equate to results and many nonprofits would be better served by holding up higher bars for outcome measurement, achievement and impact.

NAME: Sara Rubens DATE: Apr 26 2010 5:25AM

I'd love to learn more about this...
The Institute for Philanthropic Leadership and its inaugural program, The Major Gift School. An eight-day leadership program, The Major Gift School is designed to teach nonprofit leaders how to cultivate individual donors. " Where can I go to learn more?"

NAME: Chris McLeod DATE: Apr 27 2010 3:38PM

Thank you, Sara, for your interest in The Major Gift School. You can find out more information on the website of the Foundation For The Carolinas -- see right hand menu bar . <http://www.fftc.org/Document.Doc?id=934> If you email me directly at cmcleod@fftc.org, I would be glad to send you an executive summary of The Institute for Philanthropic Leadership.