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Common Threads of Philanthropy:

A Love of Humanity That Transcends Generations

by Terri Bradford Eason

Philanthropy is an intimidating concept for many people. Most people are reluctant to label themselves as philanthropists, but it's a myth that philanthropy is something that's embraced and practiced by only a select, chosen few. In fact, philanthropists can be found in all age groups, demographics, and even economic classes. Importantly, the Black community is among the most philanthropic of communities in our country. The following Q&A's will dispel many myths about philanthropy and challenge you to see yourself as a philanthropist.

What is philanthropy? Who is a philanthropist?

Your answers to these questions will likely evolve over the years and may very well depend on the generation to which you belong. The word "philanthropy," as derived from Greek language roots, literally means "love of humankind." This common thread of love and concern for one's neighbor is central to all definitions of philanthropy. However, in my experience, there are generational differences in understanding and practicing philanthropy.

Mature generations, including Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), tend to give to causes that inspire them personally, such as medical research and innovation. This age group seeks to align with the organization's mission, so they feel gratification through each charitable gift. Middle generations like Generation X (born 1965–1980) are more likely to view philanthropy as an opportunity to identify their personal mission and develop a charitable giving strategic plan. The Gen X population strives to be knowledgeable and thoughtful in their giving. Their level of support is directly linked with the value proposition and ROI (return on investment) or ROIP (return on intended purpose). In contrast, there is a noticeable shift by Millennials (born 1980–1994) and Gen Z (born 1995–2010) from traditional



organizations and purposes to newer and grass-roots. For example, younger donors tend to direct their donations to specific programs that make an immediate impact. One thing is for certain: Philanthropists can be found in every generation.

What is unique about Black philanthropy?

Charitable giving within the Black community is not a new concept. Generations of individuals and families have created and left a legacy of supporting those in need within their community. Uplifting one's neighbor is a commandment birthed at home and carried out through a variety of charitable gifts, ranging from providing food and clothing to those in need, to making monetary donations, to committing to the benevolent offering or church-building fund. As noted in an article published by the Ford Foundation, Black donors give a larger portion of their income to charity than any other racial group. A noticeable distinction is that Black donors are more likely than other groups to make informal charitable contributions to faith-based and traditional human services organizations. Supporting those in need by donating resources to others is a priority and common practice among Black donors, though many of those givers tend to remain anonymous. For such givers, the intrinsic value of giving back is their reward, as they forego the desire to be recognized publicly for their generosity.

How might your role as a philanthropist evolve over the years, given your stage in life?

Many within the Black community find themselves navigating through the "Four Phases of Philanthropy" to determine where they are now and where they want to be.

The first phase begins with emergence, where individuals feel a desire to give back and support causes and are willing to investigate charitable

options. Next, they transition into the growth phase in which they make charitable donations, and donors express an interest to increase their philanthropy through time, talent, and treasure to make a significant impact. The third stage opens the door for givers to transition into the preservation phase. It is here where donors begin making donations at higher levels and for multiple causes across the nonprofit landscape to reinforce their personal involvement, support, and commitment. The fourth and final phase is transfer. In this stage, donors want to establish and document their legacy. It is usually the matriarchs and patriarchs who want to inspire, motivate and energize family and friends to become more philanthropic. The transfer phase is also where donors conduct deliberate conversations about their philanthropic intent and personal mission. Donors will have demonstrated some type of philanthropic interest before they begin this navigation process.

What's a key step in deciding what causes you support — and how you support them?

A great first step is asking yourself what you are passionate about. Perhaps you could develop a personal mission statement that describes your charitable giving philosophy. Often, the answer is found in the number of contributions you have made to specific organizations, programs or causes. You may discover that you have compiled a long list of interests to choose from. If that's the case, your next task is to prioritize your charitable gifts to align with your personal mission statement and philosophy to ensure you are fulfilling your donor intent.

How do the so-called philanthropic “rules of engagement” differ among the generations?

From both a donor's and a nonprofit organization's perspective, establishing rapport to earn trust and develop a philanthropic relationship and partnership is essential. Equally important is understanding the preferred way Black donors want to be engaged. This may vary depending on the generation. Some favor communicating through personal notes, letters and direct phone calls. Others are interested in gathering data via email or other methods (e.g. DropBox, Google Docs), so they can make knowledgeable decisions beforehand and facilitate their philanthropy efficiently. Additionally, there are

those who have embraced today's virtual world and choose to advance philanthropy electronically through “give now” links and portals. Regardless of the specific generation group, “rules of engagement” must be identified and match cultivation efforts to be effective and successful. Donors who engage with nonprofits should certainly voice their preferences with the organization's representatives to help ensure their needs are met.

How can you empower yourself to become an effective philanthropist as you show your “love of humanity”?

Establishing a charitable giving strategic plan is a great way to spark your philanthropic interest and approach. You can create a plan by becoming better informed and educated about nonprofits and philanthropic causes as well as by actively engaging with organizations and your community. Some donors consider themselves to be philanthropic when they perform individual acts of giving that are not tied to a larger planned effort. However, those same donors come to see themselves as effective philanthropists when they take a consistent long-term, strategic, and intentional method to giving.

Without a doubt, the tradition of charitable giving is an established, solid foundation of philanthropy within the Black community. The legacy of providing resources to support those in need is a common thread among all generations of givers. However, Black donors seldom consider their kind acts of generosity as philanthropy or see themselves as philanthropists. So, where do we go from here? The key takeaway is anyone — even you — can become a philanthropist. I invite you to take a moment and define what philanthropy means to you. Next, determine the steps you need to become a more effective philanthropist through time, talent, and treasure!

For more information about how to develop a personal mission statement, establish a charitable giving strategic plan and navigate through your philanthropic journey, please feel free to contact me: teason@clevefdn.org.

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