



Opening Keynote

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I am so honoured to be here at the India Fundraising Conference today. This is really a conference whose time has come. I'd like to start by asking a question: How many of you have ever experienced burnout? If you have, you are not alone.

I just wrote a book about it called 'Fundraising Without Burnout: Radically Re-imagining Philanthropy to Transform Your Impact'. Burnout is at an all-time high, especially since the Covid pandemic. A recent report by mental health organisations showed that 80% of employees are reporting feeling emotionally drained by their work, and 1 in 4 are reporting severe burnout. This is a crisis that needs attention.

Today I will talk about how burnout is manifesting in the social impact sector, particularly among fundraisers and founders. For many years now, we have been sounding the alarm bell about the challenges in philanthropy, especially the historical inequities and power imbalances. COVID has exacerbated these challenges. We've seen people having to repeat heartbreaking stories over and over to convince donors, and we've seen a lot of weariness from philanthropy's performative words followed by pledges that don't materialise into donations. **Many development staff have become so exhausted that they're not just quitting their jobs, they are leaving the social impact sector.** This poses a big problem for us.

Several years ago, two foundations (the Haas' Jr. fund and Compass Point), surveyed thousands of development directors and executive directors of nonprofit organisations and compiled a report, 'UnderDeveloped: A National Study of Challenges Facing Nonprofit Fundraising'. There were three key findings from the research:

- The Development Director position had become a revolving door with very high turnover and an average vacancy of 6 months between individuals holding the position.
- Nonprofits struggle to find the right talent which can be interpreted as having unrealistic expectations from the fundraiser.
- There is a lack of organisational support and capacity in doing the fundraising work in terms of systems, documentation, planning, and support from board members.




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As a result, 50% of the development directors surveyed were frustrated, exhausted, and planning to quit within the next 6 months.

To add to these trends, there was the pandemic, with its disproportionate impact based on race, gender, disability, caste, etc. The gender effects of COVID-19 are particularly significant because our sector is powered by a majority of women. Approximately 80% of fundraisers identify as women, but 80% of executive leadership roles such as “chief development officer” are occupied by men. This is important when considering the causes of burnout, since the impact of burnout varies by gender. Men report that burnout makes them feel very disconnected from work, whereas women report feeling anxiety, severe stress, and imposter syndrome. We need to pay attention to how our workforce and our philanthropic sector overall are contributing to this burnout.

Our current model of operating expects our development director to perform miracles. However, we cannot pin all of our hopes on one person and then be surprised when they collapse with the weight of the world on their shoulders. Fundraisers know that the best case scenario is that they successfully raise all the funds for this year's budget. But then the peak they scale becomes the new benchmark. Next year, they have to hit an even bigger target. If they don't succeed, they have to bear witness as the organisation they love suffers. The stakes are very high.

I wrote my book, 'Fundraising without Burnout', as a love letter to all fundraisers. As a fundraiser earlier in my career, I once helped an organisation bring in multi-million dollars in grants. But despite the achievement, it was the most miserable I have ever been. Within a few months, our culture changed to be closed and hierarchical. Instead of feeling accomplished, I was filled with guilt at causing all the change. Something inside me felt broken. I was completely burnt out.



When I pivoted to a grantmaking role, I finally realised why my years as a fundraiser had led me to exhaustion. I was not the one that was broken, the system was. I saw so many innovative and courageous projects being voted down because the grant-making committee considered them to be too risky. Projects that I thought upheld the status quo were funded instead because the other decision-makers – whom I like to call 'pale male from Yale'- thought the project leaders reminded them of their younger selves. I understood then why projects led by women and girls of colour receive less than 1% of philanthropic funding. What I had been interpreting as my failure to get more funders to invest in these issues was, in fact, a failure of our systems.

Coming back to burnout, let's understand the phenomenon. Dr. Maslach, the researcher who coined the term 'burnout', calls it an erosion of the human soul. The WHO describes it as a symptom resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. This definition is important because it acknowledges that **burnout is not just an employee problem but a sectoral problem requiring a sectoral solution. Burnout chips away at the morale and health of our leaders and teams.** Unfortunately, we've been taught to believe that success of our organisations and the well-being of our teams are mutually exclusive. But we must consider the cost of this mindset. The loss of motivation and disengagement caused by burnout harms our work. But what is driving this? There are 3 important things that we need to be aware of:

- We tend to blame individuals rather than systems for burning out. When a fundraiser shares their challenges, the response they receive leads to shame and self-doubt.
- We don't give fundraisers enough support and we expect miracles. With a lack of investment in fundraising, we are not setting anyone up for success.
- We are not addressing this as a sector. We've inadvertently centred our work on the needs of donors instead of the communities we serve and the people who serve them.

The reason we are exhausted and burnt out is not because we are not good enough. It is because of inequitable systems that were designed to make it hard to change the status quo. So we eventually become too exhausted, we give up and we burn out. We cannot give up.

With a lack of investment, we are not setting our fundraisers up for success. Fundraising is a team sport.

The good news is that burnout is recognisable, preventable, treatable and reversible when addressed proactively. However, if you ignore the warning signs, it can take 2 to 5 years to recover. We have to change this now. **Nonprofits often operate with the scarcity mindset, expecting employees to overwork because they love the work and promoting toxic productivity.** What we are witnessing today is a result of buying into that system.

So what can we do to prevent this?

First, instead of blaming our employees for burnout, we need to acknowledge this as a systemic issue and create healthy work cultures. Last week I met with a nonprofit that is giving their employees sabbaticals after 2 years, unlimited menstrual leave, and stipends for personal growth and mental care. This should be the norm, not the exception.

Second, instead of putting all the responsibility on one person – the fundraiser – we can ensure that fundraising is a team sport and build stronger cultures of philanthropy. We can share with donors the true cost of what it will take. As a sector, we must push for trust-based philanthropy including unrestricted multi-year giving without unnecessary reporting requirements.

We've been convinced for so long that we do not hold the power to change things, but what if we do? What if we collectively decide to shift into an abundance mindset? What if we sat in a space of possibility knowing there are 200 billion dollars sitting in donor advisory funds right now, just waiting for the right organisations? What if we considered the abundance of people who support us in other ways, offer new perspectives, and are our champions?

Remember, we are the sector where humanity's soul shines most brightly. I want to offer you a new way to reimagine fundraising. I want you to imagine it as the most joyful, exciting job, full of possibilities. I want you to imagine yourself, fully supported, invigorated and filled with hope, knowing that every 'No' is just a turn in the road towards funding partners aligned with you. Imagine how that would feel. The truth is no funder, no foundation, no philanthropist can change the world without you. You are the magic. **Each one of us got into this work because we were inspired by somebody who came before us and changed the world. Now it's our turn.**