

Speaker 1:

Hello and welcome to Mission + Markets, a podcast by CAPTRUST, where we explore trends and best practices for endowments and foundations related to mission engagement, fiduciary governance, and investment management, hosted by CAPTRUST's Heather Shanahan, director of the endowments and foundations practice. Each episode shares research resources and recommendations from industry insiders so your nonprofit can focus on what's most important: the mission.

Heather Shanahan:

Welcome to our latest episode of Mission + Markets. I'm your host, Heather Shanahan. Today's topic is one that all nonprofit organizations hold dear, donor engagement, and I'm super excited to welcome our special guest, Bob Murray. Bob is a fundraising professional with extensive experience in advancement operations, leadership, fiscal planning, and program operations. Bob is currently the executive director of Casual Simulation, a Grand Rapids, Michigan-based nonprofit. Casual Simulation is focused on bridging the digital divide in West Michigan and beyond. Previously, Bob held various leadership roles at Ferris State University, Alma College, and Central Michigan University. He holds a Master of Business Administration from the School of Business and Nonprofit Management at North Park University, as well as a Master of Science in Biology from Central Michigan University. Outside of work, he's served on the boards of various organizations, including the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy, GreenTree Cooperative Grocery, and the Seven Ponds Nature Center. So Bob, thank you so much for joining us and welcome.

Bob Murray:

I appreciate that very much. We do lots of things for passion in this life. So a number of those boards that I've served on are really important things, and I really appreciate the opportunity to be here today.

Heather Shanahan:

Well, thank you. You bring a lot to the table, so we're excited to talk with you today. So let's start by setting the stage. There have been so many demands on support from donors in recent years. It certainly started with COVID creating unprecedented need, followed by all the economic turmoil that we've had that's really placed organizations in the position of responding to much greater need in our communities at a time where their own resources may be stretched or negatively impacted. Definitely that was the case in 2022. We've experienced natural disasters such as the catastrophic earthquakes in Turkey and Syria; we have a war in Ukraine; I don't think it comes as a big surprise that many nonprofit organizations are citing donor engagement and donor fatigue as their top fundraising challenges right now. What's the landscape looking like for you? What issues are impacting your conversations with donors, and are you finding that that's the case in terms of fatigue and just exhaustion with the state of the world from our donors at this point?

Bob Murray:

Well, Heather, I appreciate that question, and that's absolutely a lifetime issue for all parties concerned. I will tell you, in my time in higher education, without a doubt, the donor fatigue from campaign to campaign. In my new position at Casual Simulation, we're a nonprofit that is tech-based, and we really are having conversations around virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence. So this is an exciting time for this space, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Right.

Bob Murray:

And I really see our opportunity with this group for us to partner with other organizations and to really infuse some energy where there has been this fatigue. So yeah, I agree with you completely that there is donor fatigue; people are constantly being asked to support things; but my real passion is and always has been donor engagement. We're all about making sure that we've got donors who are engaged but systemically engaged. They're given the opportunity to participate. And the old saying, "If you ask someone for money, you're going to get advice, and if you ask someone for advice, you're going to get money," right?

Heather Shanahan:

Mm-hmm.

Bob Murray:

But it's the same thing when you ask somebody to participate: Give them an opportunity, they're going to see if this is something that they're really interested in. And with these conversations around cutting-edge technology is, I think, a great conversation starter, but it's also something that I see schools K-12 and secondary education, bringing into their... Really put, it's another arrow in the quiver for these fundraisers to say, "Listen, we have these new opportunities." And I think that really has to be the space that we're traveling in. We have to continue to be nimble. Whatever our organization is, we have to continue to be nimble and move into a space where we're going to help move things forward.

Heather Shanahan:

Right. So it's really about maybe, I mean, in your situation, you're doing something that's brand new. I mean, it's cutting edge. I'm not sure I really completely understand it, and that's probably okay.

Bob Murray:

Trust me, it is. As my father asked me, "What are you doing for a living now?" I got it when you were asking people for scholarships. What this is virtual reality? All this stuff." So yeah, I get it, and that's okay. But we could spend the next three or four hours talking about this work. But the important thing is that we're developing tools to be able to help people really address the issue of digital literacy, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Mm-hmm.

Bob Murray:

Digital literacy, yeah, it's just reading and writing. I mean, you look at this next generation and everyone, no matter what industry they're in, they have to be digitally literate.

Heather Shanahan:

Right. So you're fortunate that you are working with the mission that is new. How would you handle that? At this point, if you were still really more in the higher ed space, how do you keep fresh content? How do you tell your story differently? Do you need to? Is that important?

Bob Murray:

I think in the higher ed space, it's important to build on your history. If you have a robust history, it's important to share where you've been, where you are, and have a very, very, very clear vision of where you're going. And my previous two employers, Ferris State University and Alma College are very good at that. These are two institutions that really have a rich history, have done some marvelous work, and really have built in the future; they're looking at the future of higher education. And I'm going to tell you what, I think you recognize this very clearly. This is a turbulent, turbulent time for higher education, and you have to be able to identify what makes you unique and really run with that. So it's exciting; it's an exciting time in higher education, but it's also a terrifying time in higher education.

Heather Shanahan:

Right, yeah. So how much do you think geography comes into play when you're talking about the donor conversation? Tell us a little bit about where you're based and what the environment's like there, and how does that play out across the country, do you think?

Bob Murray:

Geography's incredibly important. I think throughout the country, you have the rural space and the urban space. And typically, in the urban space, it doesn't matter what your nonprofit is, if you're in an urban space where you have industry, you're surrounded by industry, you're having different conversations. And if you're in a more rural space, as a professional fundraiser, you need to most likely go into those urban spaces. And I have seen that over and over again because geographically the places that I've been employed have been pretty remote. But the important thing is being able to find those champions. I am currently based in the Grand Rapids, Michigan, area. I cannot think of a more sophisticated environment for philanthropy than Grand Rapids, Michigan, I think. There may be some people that would contest that, but I would tell you very clearly that we have a very robust environment.

And one of the things that we have done with Casual Simulation is we have actually partnered with the Grand Rapids Public Museum. What's a smart thing that you can do with a brand-new nonprofit that has a really robust mission? You partner with the oldest nonprofit in the community, which is the Grand Rapids Public Museum. And so I have stepped into a situation where some really fantastic relationships have been built, and those would be my suggestions to any nonprofit. Find those champions, find those entities, find those natural partners, and leverage those to the best of your ability.

Heather Shanahan:

Okay, so if I'm hearing it's mission alignment, if I'm a startup, then how do I align my efforts and mission with a more established organization that may be serving the same base but differently? And then if I'm in a geographically challenged area, go to bigger city?

Bob Murray:

Well, I think that you're exactly right. And the thing we should never forget is the old adage of the millionaire next door. And to be able to, in your own community, as you shared at the front end — I'm on the Chippewa Watershed Conservancy, which is based out of Mount Pleasant, Michigan, and there is an incredibly robust donor base in that area. People really believe in the work, the preserves that are being built, the preserves that are being established by this nonprofit, and the importance of this natural resource in our community. So yeah, I think that's an important component.

Heather Shanahan:

One word that we often hear is stewarding donors. What does that mean to you?

Bob Murray:

It literally means everything to me. I think that that is something that religious organizations have established and have done very well over the years. I think that there are a lot of nonprofits that do a very good job at that; I think that there are a lot of nonprofits that don't do a very good job at that. And the importance of keeping a very clear line of communication with those individuals that are supporting your mission is incredibly key. Making them feel and know that they're part of your team is incredibly important. And I will tell you, when I worked at Alma College, we developed a little tile that our ceramics professor designed for us for our Planned Giving Society. And I would hand those out — it's just a really beautiful tile — I would hand those out to every member of our Planned Giving Society. And I will tell you what, over and over again, someone would reach out to me, they would send me a photograph of, "Hey, guess what? I just redid my kitchen, and this tile is in the very center of my kitchen, incorporated."

Heather Shanahan:

Oh wow, that's cool.

Bob Murray:

So those little things, I mean, tchotchke and being tchotchke-intense is not a great thing, but being able to have those very thoughtful little things that remind your donors of your organization — it's important.

Heather Shanahan:

Well, that's probably a nice pivot. Planned giving and your giving society — and I'm an organization that doesn't have anything in place, and I don't have anybody beyond my staff that has any idea or direction — you've got a lot of experience there. How did you get started?

Bob Murray:

I do have a lot of it. I've been a planned gift-giving professional for the last 28 years. I will tell you the best way to get started is to really sit down with your team. If you're a small nonprofit or a larger nonprofit that really does not have a planned giving program, really break out what this would look like to you and how long have you been around? Do you have donors that might be ready for this? And here I'm going to now go immediately to the tech part of this conversation, go to ChatGPT and type in, "I want to start a planned giving program."

Heather Shanahan:

And see what it tells you.

Bob Murray:

I'm [inaudible], it will give you a very nice answer. I was fortunate enough to be trained by some of the finest planned giving professionals in the country, and the message hasn't changed from close to 30 years ago to right now. Building those relationships, establishing a program where you have, again, it's all about transparency, communication, and really sharing with these individuals what their planned gift is going to do for the organization. You ought to make sure having an incredibly effective database or a

CRM that's going to help you manage your contacts and your donors is incredibly important. Because if you are not keeping records of what these folks are sharing with you and what you've shared with them, all will be lost, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Right.

Bob Murray:

You will not have as robust a program as you would've wanted. But yeah, it is a great thing to start. As I have always told people, planned giving is a painless way to give to your organization.

And without exception, so I've run charitable gift annuity programs for many years, and I have the data, and I think Jerold Panas in one of his books specifically referenced the extension of your life expectancy. If you do a planned gift or a charitable gift annuity, it adds 10 years onto your life because it is an important thing to do and it takes conservatively five years to really get a program rolling.

Heather Shanahan:

So there are often some cautionary tales in there. As a nonprofit leader, a development leader, you have a tendency to get so excited when someone tells you, it's like, "Oh, it's finally working, and they've told me that they're leaving a gift by request." First of all, a lot of times you just don't know, which is [inaudible] challenge.

Bob Murray:

That's true.

Heather Shanahan:

You sure wish you did. So for anyone who's thinking about making a gift by request, telling your organization that you're giving too so that they can...

Bob Murray:

Please do, please, please, yeah.

Heather Shanahan:

Communicate with you and understand your wishes. But I think also you run into some challenges with the tail wagging the dog a little bit where you want to — this goes back to honoring donor intent — you want to, as a nonprofit organization, whatever it is that the donor wants to do, absolutely answers, yes, you're excited about it. But you really run into some risks that way; you really can't operate that way. So if you do have the opportunity to steer that direction of where the gift is going and what the donor wants to do, how do you delicately work around that so that you're not left with having to start a new program to support a gift that you receive, which is great, but it doesn't really map out what you've got in place and what your needs are.

Bob Murray:

Well, I think this is an important part of this conversation, and it's all about policies and procedures. You have to make sure that your organization has a very clearly understandable set of policies and procedures, and your team is following those. Over and over again, as I have set up scholarships through

the years, or endowed funds, the documentation that you're having these donors sign, you want to make sure that it's going to work for everybody, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Right.

Bob Murray:

So if you are a small nonprofit and this is not aligned with your mission, you should not be taking the gift, or you should very clearly say, "Hey, this really is not going to help us. It's going to be more work for us to spend this money."

Heather Shanahan:

Yeah, unintended burden.

Bob Murray:

Exactly. So it's all about appropriate documentation. And what I have always said is, these signed documents are a contract. They're a contract for the institution to follow donor intent, but it's also the donor knowing very clearly that, "Hey, this is what we're going to use this money for." So yeah, I learned about a year and a half into my career — I was so excited about everything — within the first year, I'm like, "Oh my goodness, you want to do a scholarship? Of course we can do a scholarship," and I would say yes to things that I shouldn't have said yes to. And then backpedaling is a horrific thing. So understanding what you can and cannot do in your organization, that's priority number one, but also being very clear because all of this relationship that you have with your donor is built on trust. And as soon as you erode that trust, bad things could happen, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Right.

Bob Murray:

Or bad things. Or those folks will just walk away.

Heather Shanahan:

Right, right.

Bob Murray:

And then they'll go talk to their friends who are all people you wanted to help support your organization. And so yeah, it's really important to make sure that you can... I've been involved with a number of gifts where we have said, "Gosh, we just can't take that." Or one of the really important things is to have a gift acceptance policy, because I've also been involved with individuals that have said, "Hey, we want to give you this manufacturing facility " — you know where I'm going with that, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Congratulations.

Bob Murray:

Yeah.

Heather Shanahan:

It has toxic waste associated with it.

Bob Murray:

Oh wait, hey, that's cool, but our gift acceptance committee requires that I provide them with a Phase 1 Environmental Site Assessment. I mean, people give because they believe in your organization, and people give and they recognize that even if there are tax benefits, they're still giving money away. And it's also the other points that I'd make very clearly is you got to include all the advisors you possibly can. That you have their CPA, you have their attorney, that recognize that you're not an advisor — you're here to help facilitate their wishes, but you're not their advisor for their assets, yeah.

Heather Shanahan:

So that's an interesting point. So I'm a nonprofit leader and I want to get this planned giving platform going, and I know that I probably would do well to build relationships with attorneys, CPAs, advisors in my community, but I'm really busy. How do I do that? How do I get those relationships running? And is it important? Is that the right audience, or some of that?

Bob Murray:

It is really important, and I guess it depends pretty clearly on where you are geographically. I can tell you, in rural Michigan, that's an important thing because you've got a lot of community members that are interested in your organization being successful, if you have a food bank or something along those lines. And the real commodity in this work — and Heather, you know this — the real commodity is our relationships, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Sure.

Bob Murray:

That is the currency that we trade in here.

Heather Shanahan:

Mm-hmm.

Bob Murray:

And so building those relationships is going to help you in the long run. But that's where joining Rotary or things of that nature can be very helpful as you're interacting with those folks. But also knowing that, "Hey, I just want to come and have coffee with you. Let's meet for coffee." Maybe this is something we meet once a month, whatever that might look like, but it's important. And I have developed through the years — and this waxes and wanes as far as planned giving advisory groups — some organizations have had really robust planned giving advisory groups, and you'll bring those professionals in to talk about trusts, and you name it, wills and all of those things that the advisors can help you with. That's a good way to go, I think, if you have the right people on that advisory.

Heather Shanahan:

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. So we've spent time on one end of the spectrum, you're in a fresh space, probably the tech-savvy conversations, although I think about my own parents who are in their seventies that probably know more about technology than I do. So it's not an assumption that it's necessarily a younger audience, but is it a different giving conversation? Is crypto still alive and well with the younger donors? How are those conversations going?

Bob Murray:

Yeah, you ask great questions. And this tech business is a very interesting space because to be able to address the issues of digital literacy, this takes a lot of money because you have to physically be able to have the tools for a student to use, you have to physically be able to have the networks for a student to get on. And there are lots of things that are very expensive. So those conversations really revolve around how those are \$10 million, \$20 million, \$100 million conversations.

Heather Shanahan:

Right.

Bob Murray:

But the younger donors, you're exactly right. I mean, things like giving days are fantastic. I absolutely am incredibly proud of the work done at Ferris State University, and they have a giving day called One Day for Dogs in April. And at that, we're literally building out these teams of students, faculty, alumni. And I think last year we had 55 teams and it just kept building and building, and this year I'm sure they're going to have many more teams. But that is the key, in my opinion. This next generation of donors are very, very different in the way that they give. It's all about the ease of giving, Kickstarters and the various crowdfunding opportunities, and for them to be able, everybody to be able to text to give is key, the power of the QR code. I mean, you can share a lot of data from a QR code, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Right. You bring up a good point because yeah, the nonprofit organization that I was associated with is a very well-established, long legacy organization that supports children in health crisis and their families. And I think in being there for several years, I had the growing sense of while you don't want to stray from your mission, the way that you execute it might need to be different. And from donor support, I think seeing organizations that are innovating and that are seeking those partners, in this situation, you start looking at, you're serving a child in health crisis, but you're also aware of the fact that it's a multi-generational crisis. You'd have mom come in and grandmother come in, and they're coming from a rural part of the state, and that's the problem. We're doing nothing to impact the root cause of the problem.

And so what we were beginning to see was, from a grant-making perspective and from funding perspectives, that there was just a lot of interest in innovative thinking. And that's certainly the intersection where you are now in what you're talking about. How important is that and how do you navigate that if you're a nonprofit leader and you don't want mission drift? But maybe —

Bob Murray:

No, you do not.

Heather Shanahan:

The conversation needs to be different.

Bob Murray:

It does, and the important thing is, as a leader in that nonprofit — and believe me, I'm not telling you anything new — you have to have your board on your side, and your board needs to understand the importance of innovation. All of these things are very scary, and especially when you have a board member that's coming to plug in, they're coming to a meeting, they're very busy in their work. So you have to get them up to speed; you're giving them the executive summary when you can. But to be able to have an opportunity to say, "Hey, we're going to be part of this pilot study that's going to help break that generational poverty," right?

Heather Shanahan:

Right.

Bob Murray:

So we're going to be able to provide — and I will tell you the tools that we're using — our goal is to be able to say, "Hey, here's a chance for that student that couldn't maybe get their hands on the hardware, or whatever it might be, wouldn't have that path to learn how to be a software developer, or to understand the importance of software development and how it could lead to the tools they need to have a successful career." So that's all. That isn't anything I can do; that's not my bag. So literally, I understand, but I want to partner with those organizations that are working in that space, and for us to be able to say, "Hey, we've got this opportunity. Here's the plan we have, and why don't you partner with us and we'll provide this platform for these."

And it isn't just for kids. I mean, the goal is you want to start at kindergarten or before and have them understand, because our part of our mission is to really be the [inaudible] of the internet, to be able to provide a safe space where you've got equitable access to technology and it is sustainable. So it isn't one of these things where we're like, "Hey, we've got this tool. Use it now. Oh, it's disappeared," because the operating system we have is open source and it's available, it's through the MIT Open Source, and it's available to everyone, and we will continue to develop this. Sorry, I'm not trying to go too far down this because it is a fairly elaborate process, but that's the thing.

Heather Shanahan:

It's complex.

Bob Murray:

It is incredibly complex.

Heather Shanahan:

Yes.

Bob Murray:

But to simplify that, and we've got an incredible team that's working with the Grand Rapids Public Museum to make this message very clear and understandable.

Heather Shanahan:

Mm-hmm.

Bob Murray:

But could you imagine in your previous role at that organization, if I came to you and I said, "Hey, let's sit down and talk about this"? And you've got young people, but you also have folks maybe that have been incarcerated or that need to retrain, whoever they might be, whatever age they might be. And we've got this tool for you. How can we work together? And part of my job is to make sure that I say, "Hey, who are you working with? Let's figure out how we can be able to identify these resources that could be directed toward this," right?

Heather Shanahan:

Yeah.

Bob Murray:

And so to identify that. I don't know, you can tell I'm incredibly passionate about this.

Heather Shanahan:

Absolutely.

Bob Murray:

And it's really, this work is really important.

Heather Shanahan:

Yeah, absolutely. Very exciting. On that note, then, I guess you've had this amazing history in development and have obviously worn different hats, but what would you tell yourself, what experience do you tell younger you about what you did well and what you think you should have done differently as you've gone down this path of your career?

Bob Murray:

Well, let me think about that for a second. There are lots of things that I would most likely tell myself. But here's the way that I would answer that question: I wouldn't have to go back and tell myself because I developed relationships with people, with my donors who became my very dear friends, who were more than comfortable to tell me when I was doing something that wasn't necessarily on target. I remember when I first started in this job, when I was a development officer, so many years ago, I wore a gray suit every day. That was the deal. And I remember showing up at this lovely lady's house, she's in her mid-nineties, I sat down on her sofa talking to her about this, my institution, and how thankful we were for everything that she's done. And she looked at me and she said, "Bob, I think you should stop wearing gray suits because you look like you're either my minister or my mortician." So I said, "Yes, ma'am." And she said, "And by the way, you sat in my Persian cat's chair." So 20 [inaudible].

Heather Shanahan:

You like your gray suit.

Bob Murray:

Twenty minutes later, we were done brushing all the Persian cat hair off my suit. So those are the types of things that I heard over and over again, like, "Hey, tone it down a little bit, you're way too formal." The second thing within a very brief period of time after that is, I was with the donor, a very affluent individual, he's one of these guys that in 1996 was worth, I think, about \$800 million. And I asked him, I said, "I'm planning on being a planned giving guy, and I'm excited about this. And can you share with me what your estate plans are?" And he shared two things with me, "One, my estate plan is I'm never going to die." I said, "Oh, okay. We'll have to work on that."

And two, he said, "Bob, you've been talking to me about a variety of different things today," as we'd spent the day together, he said, "The thing that you need to remember is that when you're talking to a donor, you need to use a rifle approach, not a shotgun approach." When you're talking to me about something, tell me what you think I might be interested in, share with me how I might be able to engage in that particular interest, and what you need from me. Don't give me 75 things because that's too much, I don't have enough time, don't give me five things. Tell me what you need me to do and I'll do it." So those are things I go back to, and all of this stuff, so I have this reservoir, this treasure trove of guidance that I've received from others. And I will tell you, I've told those two stories a couple of times within the last two weeks, right?

Heather Shanahan:

Mm-hmm.

Bob Murray:

So my whole thing is I'm trying to, the 20-something-year-old me, that horse out of the barn, but I want to be able to help those 20-somethings that are in this industry right now, to be able to help them understand the experiences I've had. But also, that's a two-way street because I want to hear from them what they're experiencing. So I hope that helps a little bit.

Heather Shanahan:

Yeah, no, great, fantastic. I appreciate it. We have a commitment to a question as we close with guests on the show here, and obviously the title of our podcast is Mission + Markets. And so, mission impact, Bob: What does that mean to you personally, and what are you passionate about? What's important to you?

Bob Murray:

Well, hopefully I've demonstrated what I'm passionate about.

Heather Shanahan:

We've covered a little bit of that.

Bob Murray:

As I've prattled on here, but mission impact looks, to me, and really I can answer that a couple different ways, one from my personal, the work that I'm doing right now, is mission impact is that I worked with my team, we have a system in place where we are helping thousands of young people and we're helping hundreds of corporations and corporations, nonprofits, you name it. Because the type of work we're doing can help nonprofits too. I mean, this whole artificial reality, artificial intelligence, all of these things, from this point forward, our lives will never be the same. So for us to be able to help make this a

tool for good and a tool that students understand the power of this tool and how it can help them, that's what mission impact looks like for me.

And I think that it's incredibly important to stop and think as far as mission impact for others, for myself and for others, is to stop and think about where you've been and where you are, and to take that time and celebrate the work that you've done. Because if you don't take that time to celebrate the good work that you and your team have done, no one else is going to.

Heather Shanahan:

Right.

Bob Murray:

You have to understand that you're putting all of your energy into this work, and it's incredibly important. And you need to thank your teammates and your volunteers, but you also need to be able to say, "Hey, I'm proud of what I've done."

Heather Shanahan:

Yeah, yeah. That's awesome. This is a sound and not a visual, and you're so passionate about what you do. [inaudible] everybody can see that you talk with your hands, they're all over the place.

Bob Murray:

My hands are, sorry about that, yeah. I am crazy about what I do. I've been in higher ed for 30 years. I taught and ran a molecular lab prior to stepping into the world of development, and I think I finally convinced her, she's like, "You're having fun." And I'm like, "Yes, honey, I'm having fun."

Heather Shanahan:

That's awesome. Well, it shows. So thank you for the enormous commitment that you've made over the years and certainly for what you're doing right now, because it's really cool.

Bob Murray:

You bet.

Heather Shanahan:

And very exciting, and we'll have to have you back for another conversation to talk about, I don't know, how technology impacts the nonprofit world or something too.

Bob Murray:

Well, we can do that. I think that that would be something that I think your clients would be very interested in, and I think that it's something that your team could benefit from too.

Heather Shanahan:

Yeah, fantastic. Well, thank you so very much. It's been a pleasure having you with us here today.

Bob Murray:

Thank you.

Heather Shanahan:

And again for those of us that are joining us, please subscribe to Mission + Markets. We're looking forward to continuing to have amazing guests on. Bob, thank you so very much.

Bob Murray:

Thank you.

Heather Shanahan:

We're very grateful for your time, and we look forward to speaking with you again soon.

Bob Murray:

I appreciate it.

Heather Shanahan:

Thanks.

Speaker 1:

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