

Translating Complexity Into Effective Practice

BRIEF 01

Si, Se Puede (Yes, We Can)

OMG CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

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Translating Philanthropic Strategies across Borders

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT IN MEXICO BOOSTS ITS REVENUES AND REIGNITES ITS OWN SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT WHEN IT CONTEXTUALIZES U.S. PRACTICE TO MATCH ITS COUNTRY'S CULTURAL NORMS.

The YMCA of Mexico operates charitable, community-based programs throughout the country. Before 2005, its programs were funded through membership fees from organization-owned sports facilities, income-generating ventures, and an annual campaign limited to a single program. While this funding strategy supported existing programs, it did not allow program expansion or services to additional communities. A \$5-million grant from The Kresge Foundation through its Mexico Philanthropy Development Initiative (FYMEX) enabled the YMCA of Mexico (Y) to build its organizational infrastructure for sustained fundraising capacity, and to conduct three major fundraising campaigns to support youth and family community development activities throughout the country. The grant also supported efforts to foster a culture of giving among individual, corporate, and government donors in Mexico.

In 2011, the OMG Center conducted a project-end evaluation of the Y's six-year capacity-building program. The OMG Center, a Philadelphia-based strategy, evaluation, and capacity-building firm, appraised the pre-grant status of philanthropy in Mexico as underdeveloped and marked by a preference among Mexicans for one-time, informal giving — largely in response to disasters. This differed markedly from the ongoing large-scale institutional giving that is common in the U.S. and Europe.

“The real success is not the buildings or the money but the increased (organizational) capacity to make change in our communities.”

-YMCA BOARD MEMBER

The task of building a fundraising engine in Mexico proved a challenge. Nonprofits in Mexico were unfamiliar with U.S. fundraising practices and the cultural norms from which they developed. Consequently, staffing for fundraising was a challenge. Seasoned fundraising professionals are not abundant in the Mexican market. After a few false starts, YMCA of Mexico settled on a development director that came from the university fundraising system, one of the few places in Mexico that uses a more U.S./Euro-centric model of philanthropy.

The structure of the grant was also unusual for the Mexican market. As originally conceived, the Kresge Foundation grant was a challenge grant, meaning that once certain targets were met, additional monies would be forthcoming. While this was a standard structure in the Kresge grant offering, it was not at all understood in Mexico. “We couldn’t get our arms around this notion of a “challenge grant”. “Peso a peso” (a match grant structure), we understood but challenge, no” said one board member. After considerable discussion between the parties, the Kresge challenge grant was changed to a match grant, better meshing with the Mexican market experience.

YMCA of Mexico faced an identity challenge, too. Well-known and frequented for its sports facilities, the general public was not aware that the Y supported a range of social programs across Mexico: camps for disadvantaged youth; border homes for

migrant youth; education and childcare facilities for children in Mexico’s poorest neighborhoods; and adult literacy programs. Many of the board members, most of the sports club members, and even some members of staff were unaware of the significant contribution that the YMCA of Mexico was making to communities across Mexico. Indeed, the staff called the programs its best kept secret. Using intensive training and awareness-building coupled with partnerships with ScotiaBank at its ATM kiosks and Soriano grocery stores at its in-store point of sale, YMCA of Mexico spread the word about its social programs and the way that individuals could make donations.

Efforts to attract large-scale donors broke new cultural ground. Because Mexico has fewer nonprofits, there is less affinity for institutional giving. According to one study, there is only one nonprofit for every 20,000 Mexicans while the U.S. has 30 nonprofit organizations for every 100 Americans. This indicator, commonly called “associational density,” is critical to building a culture of philanthropy because it signals how institutional giving is woven into everyday life. Lower associative density equals lower propensity to give.

Not only were individuals across Mexico not used to large-scale institutional giving, but only a few among the board and development staff were comfortable asking others to give. When it was first suggested that board members model the new giving culture by donating to the Y’s social programs, board members were asked for a relatively nominal

“Philanthropy isn’t just the money. It is the mindset of contribution, of making change, of being in this together. Mexico is getting there.”

-YMCA BOARD MEMBER

figure and all members were asked to give the same amount. The notion of asking members to donate based on their ability to give, the “give until it hurts” philosophy, was culturally unfamiliar. Equally significant, board members in Mexico, unlike their counterparts in the U.S., were loathe to ask their friends and business associates to make a donation to the Y’s social programs for fear that

“The Y changed when it had a cadre of people with the skills to create an environment of confidence.”

-DIRECTOR OF THE YMCA FUNDRAISING TEAM

their colleagues would think that the YMCA of Mexico was in financial straits. Mexicans were still learning the concept of making regular investments into the community to support social programs and the board became the first test case for the Y. It was only after rigorous awareness-building and training that the board and staff gained confidence in making “the ask” (a direct request for a contribution). With increased pride in their social programs and confidence in fundraising success,

the YMCA of Mexico board and staff made “si, se puede” their rallying cry.

“Once we learned about all that the YMCA was doing in the communities that it served, we could talk to others about it... it gave us confidence and pride,” said a long-time board member. A development staffer said, “The board really made a change and we saw it and it made us want to do more to support. It became less about us and more about building our communities.” As a result, overall campaign donations to the YMCA of Mexico went from \$65,000 in 2005, the first year of the grant, to \$ 5.9 MM in 2011, the final year of the funding match. As importantly, the mix of donors shifted, with major giving contributing 27% of total donations in 2011 compared to 12% in 2005 and corporate giving growing from a zero base in 2005 to over 50% of giving in 2011.

OMG GLEANED SEVERAL LESSONS FROM THE MEXICAN EXPERIENCE THAT ARE RELEVANT BEYOND MEXICAN BORDERS:

1. Goals and strategies must be clearly articulated and relevant to the realities of Mexican philanthropy in general, and to regional and local differences in particular.
2. YMCA's charitable activities had to be both visible and understood in detail by staff and volunteers in order to make “the ask.”
3. Getting the right volunteer and staff leadership in place at the outset is key.
4. Organizational infrastructure, especially staff size and the appropriate skill set, make a big difference in effectively segmenting and targeting donors.
5. Confidence is a crucial skill for advancing fundraising and the culture of philanthropy.

The YMCA of Mexico is sharing the lessons distilled from the OMG Center evaluation with others in the Mexican philanthropic market, including its sister organizations within the YMCA network. The OMG Center continues to ensure that the insights gained from this engagement — added to the wealth of our past experience — enable us to design and deliver our services through a “cultural relevancy” lens to see what additional supports, training, or organizational capacities need to be developed in order to support successful practice.



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