

Telling our story

by Marc Whitmore, More Partnership

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The first recorded use of the word "philanthropic" describes the theft of fire from the Gods by the Titan Prometheus, a mythic act which transformed mankind from lumpen clay indistinguishable from the animals into human beings filled with optimism and hope for the future. To this day, 'promethean' describes acts of daring creativity that effect change; reflecting this rebellious streak, the symbol of Promethean fire adorns educational institutions from Latin American to Finland; the name "Prometheus" itself means "foresight."

I am constantly intrigued by the ways in which this story from the distant past resonates with our work in philanthropy today. It points to the shared cultural history of giving to others that is more independent of place and time than we sometimes care to admit. The story perhaps also underlines why we gravitate towards "development" (or advancement) in preference over fundraising. The latter speaks of some ill-defined means to some undefined end; with a nod to Aeschylus' re-telling of the myth, the former points to the end itself – transformation rooted in optimism for the future.

Such transformations are being effected through philanthropy each day in schools up and down the country: we invite others to give to our institutions in order to enable someone to enrich and be enriched by the community they will join. This simple message has resonated time and again and successfully galvanized communities of support from Manchester to Birmingham, from London to Newcastle.

Some have gone further than this however, with the most daring shaping and articulating a compelling story about the difference philanthropy will make that goes beyond the impact of giving just on the individual. Instead, bold schools invite donors to imagine how their gifts will transform the whole community and beyond. Think of the success of United World Colleges Singapore – one of the world's largest schools – where a single gift transformed teaching about environmentalism, supporting teachers and a research programme that threaded environmental awareness throughout lessons; closer to home, School 21 in Stratford, London is seeing philanthropy support a focus on oracy in every single aspect of the school empowering young people in one of the country's most economically diverse boroughs; in Haringey, Highgate School's donors are supporting an astonishing programme of State/Independent teacher partnership work through a genuine two-way sharing of know-how.

Such ambitions are undoubtedly rooted in the compelling vision of the future that each institution wants to create. So too, they are firmly based in reality and built on a track-record of previous fundraising success. But such audacious visions are also built on confidence; a

confidence that – to my mind – is spreading slowly and inexorably through our sector as a whole. And this year’s IDPE conference in Birmingham will present an important moment to acknowledge this growing self-assuredness.

I say this because when I started my first campaign with Headmaster Ken Durham in 2004, the number of schools nurturing philanthropy was small, scepticism and doubt were high and there were few successful examples from which to learn. The difference between then and now is stark and was driven home to me recently during a trip to the US in January. There I spent some time with 40 Vice-Presidents of Advancement in US schools and universities as part of More Partnership’s long-term strategic alliance with US-firm Washburn and McGoldrick. The discussions were rich, fascinating and wide-ranging and made me want to understand more about the scale of performance of the institutions whose advancement professionals I’d met. Cross-checking against the wider information W&M has access to, on the 125 most successful fundraising schools in the United States, I was astonished by what I found. I thought I knew that “Everything’s bigger over there” and “the philanthropic culture is so different.” Yet savour this thought: a UK school raising £1-2M in a year is doing better than 6 of those top US schools. Going further, a UK school raising more than £2M (in cash and deferred income) a year is outperforming 1 in 5 of its American counter-parts.

That’s our story now: the very best UK schools are performing as well as some of the very best US schools in terms of fundraising. In doing so, we are having an ever-greater impact on the lives of individuals and in the wider communities we serve. This collective success is a testament to the inspiration, diligence, enthusiasm and – yes – Promethean spirit of the many women and men working in educational philanthropy in schools across the UK.

So, come to the newly-cast IDPE conference in Birmingham June of this year. Take a moment to connect to some of the astonishing stories of transformation being effected in institutions across the country. Say “hello” to my colleagues and me on the More Partnership stand. Come along to the fundraising stream we are supporting, where Melanie Bushell and Jan Perrins have been working hard with IDPE’s Louise Bennett to curate some really interesting case studies. Be inspired. Take a moment to be proud of what you do. Stand a little taller in front of the mirror. In finishing, I’m reminded of one final aspect of the story of Prometheus: that for his crimes he was chained to a rock for eternity while an eagle pecked out his liver. While on some days in a busy Development Office we can all sympathise, at least for 11-12 June you’ll be set free. Come, celebrate, and help tell our story.

Marc Whitmore is a Partner at More Partnership www.morepartnership.com More Partnership is a fundraising consultancy – and more. Our team supports not-for-profit organisations at every stage of their philanthropic journey, whether they’re setting their direction, training their teams, getting on with projects, or evaluating their performance.