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Is Trust Losing Ground in Philanthropy?

La confiance est-elle en perte de vitesse en philanthropie?

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From its very beginnings, philanthropy has rested on a moral contract: trust.

A fragile trust, resting on a delicate balance between the resources given and the vulnerable people who benefit from them. But in recent years, that trust has been eroding.

Isolated scandals, excessive media coverage of salaries, the ratios of fundraising events, and the pursuit of absolute transparency have fed a legitimate curiosity.

But the reality is that this curiosity quickly turned into mistrust which, instead of improving the system, is slowly smothering it.

Yet while vigilance is necessary, systematic suspicion causes real harm—especially to a sector that is already working miracles with so little.

Philanthropy Under Constant Watch

Charities in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada are among the most heavily regulated organizations in the country. Even before a single dollar is spent, the requirements are numerous: tax transparency, accountability to funders, internal policies, tight governance. Philanthropy has become a justification machine, sometimes at the expense of its primary mission: helping.

And yet, despite this tight net, cases of abuse are more than rare. Most organizations are led by people who are honest, competent and driven by a deep sense of duty. But the public sphere has a selective memory: we remember the exceptions, not the thousands of responsible acts carried out every day.

The result? A pervasive distrust that pushes donors to want to control everything, right down to organizations' internal affairs. How many times have we heard "I want my money to go only to this specific project" or "I want my donation to go directly to the cause"? Demands that seem legitimate on the surface, but that often deprive organizations of the flexibility they need to respond to real needs.

Giving to Give, Not to Control

Philanthropy isn't an à la carte menu. You can't choose every single nail you're funding to build a house. And yet that's exactly what many donors demand today. Organizations then find themselves forced to build artificial projects simply to meet funding criteria. Impact reports and indicators multiply to reassure donors, while time slips away, unrestricted funds melt like snow in the sun, and essential but less popular programs go without resources.

In our eagerness to measure and direct every single action, we lose sight of what matters most: human impact—the kind that can't always be translated into numbers.

Seasoned Managers

Contrary to what some may think, organizations aren't lacking in rigor. Every day, they juggle tight budgets, pending amounts, multiple constraints and complex administrative obligations. At their core, they are, in fact, true impact managers.

But for them to fully play their role, they need to be given back the room to maneuver that we grant without hesitation to other sectors. In the business world, we invest in people we believe in. In philanthropy, we need to return to that same instinct. We need to invest in organizations we believe in and trust them to act.

Trusting means accepting that lasting impact isn't measured quarter by quarter, but over years. This isn't blind faith—it's respect for expertise. Just as we don't dictate to a doctor which procedure to follow, we shouldn't dictate an organization's priorities to it.

A Shared Responsibility

The responsibility for restoring trust doesn't rest on donors alone. Organizations also need to better explain their choices, their constraints and their realities. Too often, out of fear of displeasing a donor or losing a gift, challenges and vulnerabilities go unspoken. This kind of transparency—constructive, not punitive—is essential to rebuilding the bond of trust. Showing vulnerability is frightening. Who would want to give to cover a deficit rather than build the future? And yet that very gift could be exactly what saves a cause on the brink—not for lack of rigor, but because of a capacity issue.

Funders, for their part, need to keep moving along the path of trust-based philanthropy—seeking to correct power imbalances and funding structures, teams and governance more generously. This means accepting that lasting performance doesn't come solely from visible projects, but from the strength of the people and systems that support them. You can't demand results without reinforcing the human and organizational foundations that make them possible.

Giving Philanthropy Back Its Meaning

At its root, philanthropy means "love of humankind." Yet when control and fear take over completely, we lose the very meaning of the act of giving.

Trusting means recognizing that the most relevant solutions don't always come from the donor, but from the field. It means understanding that a dollar invested in the right organization, at the right time, can transform more lives than we think. Organizations aren't asking for charity—they're asking for trust. They're not seeking pity, but the ability to act with autonomy.

It's time to move beyond an anxious philanthropy, paralyzed by the fear of getting it wrong, and rediscover a philanthropy that is confident, vibrant and bold.

In the end, it isn't the numbers that prove transparency—it's the intentions. And trust only grows when actions confirm it.

Terminology note: In this text, the term organization refers to nonprofit organizations and charities as a whole, including public foundations such as hospital foundations. The term donor or funder, meanwhile, encompasses individual donors, businesses, and private foundations, including family foundations.

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