



## Fundraising Ethics: Toward an In-Depth Understanding of Individual Donors' Perceptions

Tine Faseur – KU Leuven | Tine De Bock – KU Leuven | Glenn Timmermanns – Hogeschool PXL

Exploring donors' ethical evaluations of nonprofit fundraising practices, this study fills a critical research gap, offering an ethical framework from the donors' perspective to advance both fundraising theory and professional standards.

Key research question: What drives individual donors to perceive nonprofit fundraising practices as ethical or unethical?

Seven drivers (authenticity, honesty, effectiveness, accountability, efficiency, freedom of choice, and respect) underpin donors' ethical perceptions. A nuanced understanding of these drivers challenges existing fundraiser-centric models, offering a richer, empirically grounded basis for ethical fundraising practices that better meet the ethical beliefs from a donors' point of view.

[#Fundraising](#) [#Ethics](#) [#Donors](#) [#IndividualGiving](#)

### Background & Context



- **Existing fundraising ethics prioritize fundraisers' perspectives**, as most ethics codes are developed by and for fundraisers - often overlooking the viewpoints of donors and other stakeholders. Many ethical standards in fundraising are built on what fundraisers think donors want, rather than on what donors actually believe is right. This mismatch can weaken truly donor-centered work and shows why it is important to place donors' own views at the heart of ethical thinking.
- **Listening to donors' own sense of right and wrong is essential.** Fundraisers need to understand and respect how donors themselves think about right and wrong, rather than relying only on their own professional judgment.
- The study used **52 in-depth qualitative, semi-structured interviews with individual donors** aged 21–81 to uncover how they judge the ethicality of nonprofit fundraising practices. A donor was conceived as someone who donated at least three times to the same nonprofit. The sample was heterogeneous with regard to gender, age, and type of nonprofit being supported.

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### Take aways & Learnings



- The study identifies **seven key drivers shaping how donors assess the ethics of fundraising practices**:
  1. **Authenticity**: alignment between fundraising practices and nonprofit identity/mission. This includes both (a) the organization's concrete mission and (b) general expectations of what nonprofits stand for (e.g., altruism, purpose-driven action, non-commercial values).
  2. **Honesty**: truthful and credible communication, both in what is said and how it is said, including alignment between promises and actions ("walk the talk").
  3. **Effectiveness**: contribution to the nonprofit's mission and fundraising goals. Donors judge practices by whether they achieve the intended impact, either in advancing the mission or in meeting fundraising objectives. Some donors may tolerate otherwise questionable methods if they are seen as effective.
  4. **Accountability**: transparency and openness about fundraising practices, including clear, understandable, and complete information.
  5. **Efficiency**: achieving fundraising goals with the lowest possible effort. This includes ensuring that the impact outweighs the input and that no meaningless or unnecessary actions take place.
  6. **Freedom of choice**: enabling donors to make informed, voluntary, and well-considered decisions.
  7. **Respect**: treating donors, beneficiaries, staff, and the environment in a correct, dignified and respectful way.
- **No universal donor, but a shared framework**: Every donor brings their own beliefs to what counts as ethical in fundraising. Still, the seven identified drivers offer a valuable starting point for fundraisers to reflect on their practices and consider which ethical aspects matter most to their audience, alongside their own organizational perspective.
- **A practical tool for reflection**: To support donor-centric ethical reflection, the authors developed a checklist with guiding questions for each of the seven drivers, offering practitioners a structured way to scrutinize their fundraising strategies from the donor's point of view (see [supplementary material](#)).
- **Opportunities for future research**: Future research could expand on these findings with approaches to explore how different contexts, donor groups, or causes influence which ethical concerns come to the forefront.

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