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OVERCOMING DIFFERENCES WITH DONORS

By Bill Stanczykiewicz

Fundraisers cannot let personal differences interfere when developing relationships with prospective donors, even when those differences include surface-to-air missiles.

That's the lesson learned and shared by Jim Morris, the former director of the United Nations World Food Programme. Morris, who led the Lilly Endowment for nearly two decades, recently received the U.S. Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award. The award from President Obama cites Morris' lifelong commitment to building a stronger nation through volunteer service.

The mood was not as serene in 2004 when a tsunami devastated two continents including the nation of Sri Lanka. When Morris visited the shaken country to oversee the U.N.'s food donations to survivors, he insisted on traveling to visit United Nations relief workers in the northeast region of the country – a region occupied by the Tamil Tigers, a rebel group in conflict with Sri Lanka's government.

As Morris traveled northeast, his helicopter was attacked with ground-to-air missiles. Morris was protected by a United Nations security guard while the helicopter was protected by heat-seeking missiles. Morris survived that battle, and after the helicopter landed safely Morris proceeded to his meeting with the region's leaders.

"It was an unnerving experience, but when I arrived, they offered me a Pepsi," Morris remembered. "I met with the Tamil Tigers, and the meeting was cordial. I let them know that we were interested in feeding their people who were in distress and not in any political agenda. And they agreed to let the food in."

An uncomfortable situation transformed into a successful resolution. Despite the peaceful agreement, Morris added, "When we left, we used a different route."

Less dramatically, but perhaps more deeply, Morris learned about crossing lines of difference when he formed a working relationship and then a deep friendship with his predecessor at the U.N. World Food Programme, George McGovern. Morris, who considers himself to be "a middle-of-the-road Republican," did not vote for McGovern when the South Dakota Senator ran for President in 1972, and Morris' initial view of McGovern was based on the Senator's identification with the most liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

Meeting McGovern changed that perception when Morris quickly discovered that the two men shared a strong passion for ending world hunger.

"I became so ashamed of myself because I had formed an opinion about the man before I had a chance to meet him or get to know him," Morris admitted. "When I did get to know McGovern, I learned that he was a great American and a great patriot.

"That's when I learned to never again form an opinion about a person until I meet them and get to know them."
This approach was put to the test each of the nine times Morris met with African dictator Robert Mugabe. "Nothing in your background prepares you for that," Morris stated. And yet, Morris negotiated agreements with Mugabe to ensure that the U.N. could feed hungry people.

"If you take time to meet with a person and then show them some respect," Morris explained, "you usually can find some common ground."

Morris delivers this message to nonprofit leaders, fundraisers and students, encouraging them to seek shared purpose and work collaboratively with each other as well as with business and government leaders. Morris frequently cites his definition of leadership as "seeing your opportunities in their greatest context," and that context can be fulfilled only by forming partnerships with others.

"Relationships are so important," Morris said. "You never know when people are going to be able to work with you to get something accomplished." Morris encourages nonprofit leaders and fundraisers to devote at least 30 percent of their time to meeting new people because, "Philanthropy is all about relationships."

This maxim also is true for fundraisers who are building relationships with prospective donors. While the potential donor needs to be interested and passionate about the nonprofit's cause and mission, the fundraiser and the prospect might not see eye-to-eye on all of the issues of the day. Morris, however, implores fundraisers to seek common ground.

"There is nothing more fulfilling than working with unselfish people with similar passions toward the common good," Morris asserted.

Even when the relationship starts with a surface-to-air missile.

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