

# Circles of Support

by Kathy Hines

*During a job interview, I was once asked how I liked being a professional beggar. The image of fund raising as panhandling permeates our world, yet it couldn't be farther from the truth. A beggar offers nothing in return for your support. A fund raiser offers concerned constituents an opportunity to invest in a cause. Chances are, a beggar won't ask you whether you'd prefer your loose change to support food purchases or bus tokens. A successful fund raiser works with donors to make sure mutual needs are met. When was the last time you received a thank you note, annual report, or donor newsletter with a return address of "corner of 7th and Main"? A fund raiser recognizes the importance of cultivating relationships, not simply to ensure a repeat gift, but rather as an acknowledgment of the donor's interest in and concern for the organization.*

The constituency from which our donors are drawn is one of our most valuable organizational resources. By taking the time to properly identify and clarify who your constituents are, fund raising efforts can be maximized. A model called "constituency circles" has been developed by The Fund Raising School

Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. The following steps will help you to map out the circles for your own child care center.

Let's start with brainstorming. Write down each type of person, group, or business who has ever had any type of connection with your center. The

more categories you come up with, the better. For the time being, don't concern yourself with questions about the appropriateness of your list items. Just let your imagination flow. A sample list might look like this:

- Students
- Parents
- Teachers
- Board of directors
- Grocery store where we buy our snacks
- Playground equipment manufacturer
- Snow removal service
- Donors
- Volunteers



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- People who came to open house
- Parents of alumni
- Anyone who saw the article on our center in the Hometown Child Care Newsletter
- People interested in education
- Bakery where we went on a field trip
- Store where we buy art supplies

Once you've finished your list, draw a series of four concentric circles on a separate sheet of paper. These circles will provide a map of your constituency, showing your closest connections in the very middle and radiating out as relationships weaken. Use the following guidelines to place each group on your list into a category.

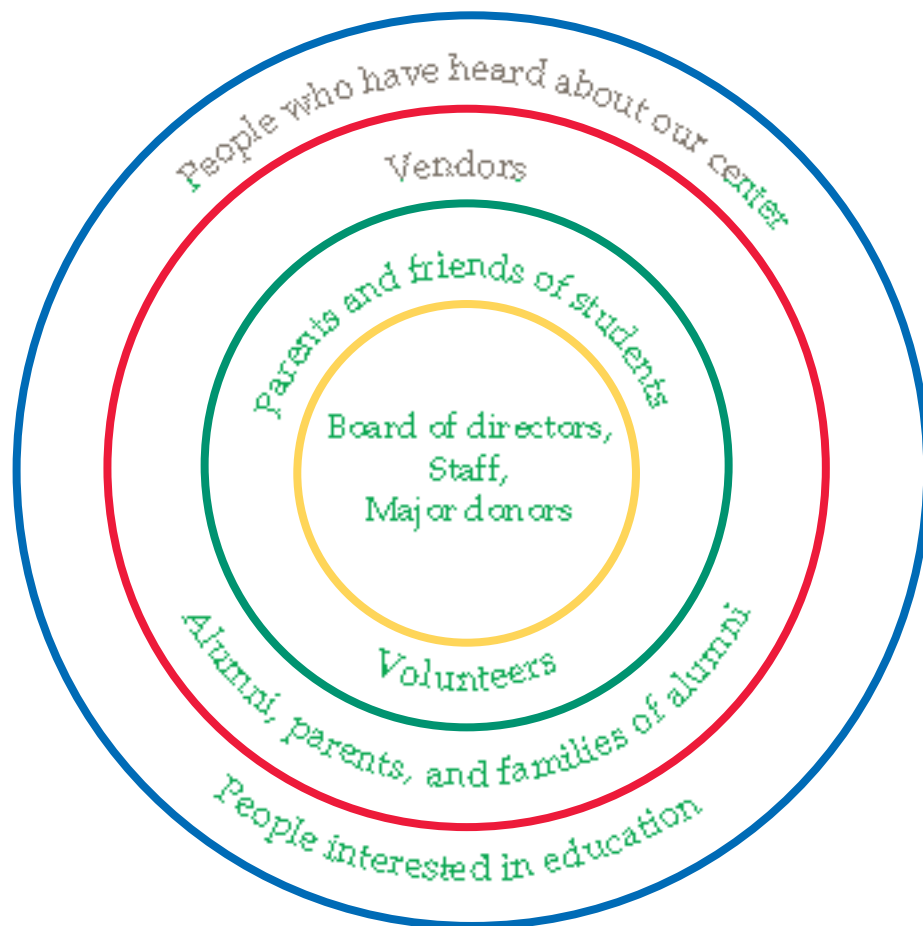
Each of the four circles represents a piece of your constituency:

- **Primary stakeholders.** Located in the very middle, this group represents people who have the closest relationship with your child care facility, those who are most invested in its mission and success. They will include your board of directors, staff, and current major donors.

- **Lesser stakeholders.** This category includes active participants, such as parents and families of current students, active volunteers, and other donors.

- **Casual participants.** These groups have a connection with your center but it is not as strong or as current as those in the previous categories. Examples might include parents of alumni or vendors (snow removal service, stores that you patronize).

- **Similar interests.** These people



have a connection with your center by a similarity of interests which could lead them to be more closely involved. Perhaps they attended an open house, requested information, or are known to support other child care centers in the community. Your ties are not as direct, but you are aware of a common bond.

The primary stakeholders are the nucleus of your child care center. These people have the closest relationships, the greatest investments, and the highest level of commitment to your success. It is their responsibility to draw the outer circles in closer, whether by setting an appropriate example, providing motivation, or advocating on your behalf.

Common fund raising wisdom states that before embarking on a

fund raising campaign you must have financial commitments from your board of directors. The constituency circles demonstrate that reasoning. If those who are closest to your center are unwilling to support it, how will you persuade those whose connections are weaker to get involved?

The circles are also a tool for prioritizing your efforts. With the myriad of responsibilities facing any center director, it is unthinkable that each prospective donor can be approached with the same amount of effort. Accordingly, work from the middle out. It will be easiest to fold in those who have close, recent, and direct connections with your child care center. This is not to say that time shouldn't be spent cultivating the outer rings as well. Just be certain that you don't overextend

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yourself, developing elaborate schemes to entice those with minimal connections before you've secured the ones closest to you.

Similarly, choose an appropriate solicitation technique for each circle. The time it takes to meet personally with the innermost rings will be worth the effort. The numbers are smaller, the connections are stronger, and you want to focus on continuing to build those relationships.

As you move farther out, it's appropriate to reduce the level of personalization. For instance, while letters to previous donors should always be personalized as much as possible, a mail solicitation to all subscribers of a local child care newsletter can be mass produced. It is also essential to spend time determining what motivates each circle of your constituency. Parents are looking for quality education for their children. Local businesses may be motivated by understanding the ultimate benefits this education offers to the community. The list of

motivations will be as varied as your constituents.

Take the time to find out what they are. Ask your current donors why they contribute. Ask potential donors what appeals to them. And, always, talk to your colleagues about their experiences at their own centers. Don't be afraid to customize the message you put out. Your center meets many needs of many people. Use that variety to your advantage.

You'll play many roles as you raise funds. Become a storyteller while you relate tales of your center's success; a businessperson while presenting the overall financial picture; a negotiator as you determine how to match your needs with the desires of your donor; an educator as you explain child development while touring the classroom. But, as long as you have clarified your goals, believe in your mission, and respect the needs of your constituents, you won't ever be a beggar. Leave the tin cup at home and start circling.