

# How To Change The Unconscious Stories You Are Telling About Women in Philanthropy

by [Kathleen Loehr](#)

Originally published at: <https://www.aspenleadershipgroup.com/change-the-unconscious-stories-you-are-telling-about-women/>

Working with women donors can feel hard because our [fundraising best practices don't always work](#). Why? Because these approaches were created in the male-centric fundraising landscape of the 1950s and 1960s. Women aren't harder – [just different](#) – in how they prefer to engage and give.

The story that “women are harder” is only one of many unconscious and detrimental stories that we as fundraisers may hold onto. Only by recognizing these ingrained ideas can we begin to change our behavior and reach the full potential of engagement and giving from today's diverse donor pool.

However, acknowledging these stories is not an easy task. We can't change what we can't see – and we may not see where our best practices lead us astray. How can we recognize the unconscious stories we may be telling ourselves?

## Try This Approach

I like Brené Brown's approach to moving through change. In her book, *Rising Strong* (2015), she writes that we need to “rumble” with our stories to find the truth. Her choice of the word “rumble” evokes great visuals for me – grappling, on the floor, getting messy, untangling knots or piles of stuff.

Rumbling begins with deep inquiry, shirt sleeves rolled up, shoulder to shoulder with colleagues and straight talk about what we know or don't know and what barriers might be getting in the way of our goals — in this case, growing support from women and other diverse donors.

Notice I say “WE” a lot above. This work requires a team, not one person doing their best to make change. A team focused on adapting fundraising to meet women and diverse donors as they prefer has a higher chance of success. Bring together colleagues willing to be a learning group that grapples with the stories, the facts and chooses together some first adaptations to try.

## You've Uncovered Some Stories. Now Get Ready to Rumble.

After you've identified a story you or the team holds, it's time to rumble with where these ideas come from and how they influence our work.

In Brown's model, after the inquiry stage, "rumbling" follows a specific set of steps:

- **Consider the source.** When did you first come to believe this story? What information led you to this conclusion?
- **Have you looked for information to confirm or deny the story?** Have you read current research and data relevant to these topics? (Great places to start for women's giving include the [Women's Philanthropy Institute](#) and my book, [Gender Matters: A Guide to Growing Women's Philanthropy](#)).
- **Where might these stories have unconsciously influenced your actions?** Remember that this process is not about blame, but rather understanding "what is" so that we can move forward. Awareness is a key step on the way to action.

Be generous with yourself and your colleagues in this process. Take time. We can only break through assumptions and myths when we are willing to explore openly and ask questions.

### Answer These Questions

Ask yourself: Do you think of a certain subsection of your donor pool as "difficult"? Is there a particular age group or demographic of donors you feel resistance or discomfort about working with?

Keep your ears open for broad generalizations about a certain subgroup. Common examples related to women's giving (in addition to "women are harder") include:

- "Women are less philanthropic than men."
- "Women defer to their spouses in charitable decision-making."
- "Women do not make big gifts."

What are some broad generalizations you might be making about other diverse donors?

### There's Another Place to Help Debunk Stories: Data and Research

You can also move beyond unconscious behaviors by using data and research. Read and discuss with colleagues the research available about how diverse groups of donors prefer to engage with causes they care about, or how they make their philanthropic decisions. With the research in hand, explore your own data system to see if any of your donors' giving patterns mirror what you've learned. A couple examples in women's philanthropy:

- If you know the research that millennial women are giving more consistently than millennial men, how are they giving to you? You might be overlooking an opportunity for support from this group (your future pipeline), or many others, if you continued your traditional analysis.

- If you know the research that women continue to give AND volunteer at retirement, have you done a data analysis on women in their late 50's+ who have had successful careers, and then crafted a tailored strategy for this group?

### Listen to Those Who Care About Your Mission

Also, speak to your donors and other key constituents from diverse backgrounds. Share their voices and feedback with your learning group. Listening to those who care about your mission is critical. Ask questions like:

- How do they feel about their relationship to your organization?
- What are they saying about you?
- What do they care about?
- How can you gain more of their voice and input?
- What is working and what is missing?
- What do they recommend to gain greater resonance?

Learning to listen more openly to each other and your supporters brings deeper understanding as well as guideposts for what can be done differently.

### Your Toolbox: Curiosity + Commitment

Using curiosity and commitment as our tools, we can consciously become aware of and address where our current best practices may not resonate with more diverse donors. I know from the research that they often don't resonate with women. What stories or assumptions do you see in yourself or your organization? Share your stories in the comments. Let's open the dialogue and rumble together.