

My Experience at AFP's Toronto Congress 2018

AFP's Toronto Congress was an empowering and highly personal experience that is changing my outlook towards the fundraising sector. But it didn't start off that way.

It started with my arms crossed against my chest and my mouth drawn tightly into a straight line. It was a frown to be honest, but it could have been mistaken for concentration.

[Hadiya Roderique](#) was giving the first plenary speech at Congress, Canada's premier educational forum for fundraisers. Ms. Roderique's experience as a [black lawyer on Bay Street](#) made front page news of the Globe and Mail last fall, and here, her powerful and informed speech tackled the racism and exclusion present in Canada's corporate culture. Her observations, statistics and personal experience brought the conference's theme, "Disrupt Philanthropy" sharply into focus. It showed that philanthropic culture in Canada was not immune to the "-isms" that affect other sectors. For me it touched a nerve that I was used to covering up.

"Why is she talking about this?" I thought. "We already know this! Just deal with it and move on!"

Well, that's exactly what she was doing. Head on.

I too am a black woman. I am a fundraiser working in Ottawa since 2005. I know what it feels like to be the only person of colour in a crowded room. But I don't *talk* about it. Instead I've gotten used to the discomfort and moved on. But am I moving? Really?

For me, the lasting impact of Congress went beyond learning how to improve and track fundraising performance. It gave me the opportunity to learn from, and learn with, over 1,000 fundraising professionals, many of whom are black and excelling in the profession. I haven't had an experience like that before. It was thrilling and empowering; they were leading their charities in progressive and inclusive new directions, and teaching others to do the same.

The three-day conference was also a wonderful opportunity to bond with colleagues from Ottawa over tacos, tequila and laughter. An unexpected night out was a great starting point for stronger friendships within the profession.

Another powerful moment for me was the closing speech given by [Cathy Mann](#), who was honoured by AFP Toronto with The Outstanding Fundraising Professional Award. Her achievements as a mentor, teacher, researcher and consultant among others, was impressive. But the raw honesty she demonstrated upon accepting her award, revealed to me that some of the most successful and passionate fundraisers have had to confront deeply personal challenges, histories or traumas. It was a reminder that we all have our worries, doubts and

fears that haunt us. Overcoming them is a practice that requires courage, persistence and belief that our actions and voices can improve the status quo for ourselves and others.

Ultimately, Congress 2018 and “Disrupt Philanthropy” was a call to acknowledge very real challenges faced by women, people of colour and members of the LGBTQ community to participate equally in society. The sessions I attended embraced the theme and challenged us to find solutions and test them.

It’s not easy confronting what holds us back. It’s certainly not for me. However, testing practical steps can make a profound difference in how we invite others to participate in philanthropy. Below are the strategies for inclusion that resonated with me most. Will you take up the challenge on behalf of your charity? Will I? Stay tuned and let’s keep the conversation going.

Three Challenges to Improve How We Engage Others in Philanthropy:

1. Be Aware that tackling biases aren’t easy.

Tackling biases are not easy because we are not aware we have them. As a result, we do not correct for them. Consider making hiring criteria and board selection criteria universal by using screens that focus solely on talent. Anonymizing resumes are one way to do this. Focus on questions that demonstrate fitness for the job.

2. Collect data.

Throughout the three-day conference we were reminded, “you can’t improve what you don’t measure.” Use data to track how many women and people of colour you interview and hire at the staff and board level. Apply this to donor engagement too. Compare your results with industry and sector data. Also, talk to your employees, board members and donors about their experience working for, or alongside your charity. This is human information statistics can’t capture.

3. Expand your view of what’s possible.

When considering new board members, new major donors and new audience members, look expansively within your database. What new names appear? Research issues that affect the giving habits of visible minorities, women and the LGBTQ community. For example, for many new Canadian communities faith is a key driver of philanthropy. For other groups, opportunities for education or family involvement are the drivers. Begin the conversation and don’t just rely on your bias.