

Questions to ask a major donor in a crisis

You're rushing towards a recently created disaster zone. Your mission is to help a community recover and you've let your family know you'll be hard to reach for a while. Your phone buzzes in your pocket. It's the office of a billionaire who says he wants to help. What's your reaction? **Rob Shimmin** investigates

It is hard to look a gift horse in the mouth when cash is such a precious and sought-after commodity in times of crisis. Let's look at five sets of questions you might do well to ask.

- Why are you helping? What's your motivation?
- What will you bring? Can you bring anything else, beyond just money?
- When can we have it? What's the phasing and availability for distribution?
- Will you let us get on with it? Will your vision of success impede the practicalities of immediate and longer-term relief? and
- Where do you fit in? Can you co-ordinate with other charities and government efforts?

Crisis management is never about perfection, but one recent crisis has delivered some positive answers to the above questions.

The Czech town of Hodonín sits on the Morava River in the south of the country where the Austrian and Slovakian borders meet. It's home to approximately 24,000 citizens, whose world was turned upside down on Thursday, June 24, 2021, when the area was hit by a freak tornado with winds reaching 200 mph.

Witnesses described cars hurled through buildings like missiles, and roofs ripped from buildings. Traditional pear trees were uprooted, spiralling upwards into a violent funnel that was at once instantly recognisable as a tornado, and yet totally alien to these parts. Tornadoes are incredibly rare in this part of the world.

Ex-service personnel described the damage as being similar to a war zone, with twisted fiery metal and collapsed buildings. Tragically, there were six deaths, with 200 more injured. The tornado left no building in its path undamaged and many were subsequently marked with an X, meaning they were beyond repair and scheduled for demolition.

The town's mayor, Libor Střecha had chosen that day to depart for a family holiday to Sardinia. Upon landing, he reversed his path and returned with haste to support his hometown. On the journey, he received a call with an offer of help from Luboš Veselý, a director of the Karel Komárek Family Foundation (KKFF). Age 52, Karel Komárek is the Czech Republic's second richest individual and is ranked by Forbes as the 502nd richest person in the world with a net worth of \$5.4

billion. He and his charitable foundations are known for focusing on the impact of donations as diligently as KKCG (his investment group) focuses on return on investment across its 36 countries of operation.

A *Forbes* article picked up on the amusing irony of that connection. 'Střecha' means roof in Czech, 'Veselý' means happy or cheerful.

Addressing the first question: 'Why are you helping?' Střecha had a head start on 'why'. Komárek had grown up in Hodonín and, just prior to the tornado striking, he had been in preliminary discussion with his foundation about a project to unite and engage parts of the Hodonín community through shared public green spaces, an approach championed by KKFF's Proměny (metamorphosis) Foundation.

Hodonín still houses a major datacentre from KKCG's DataSpring and offices for its energy company, MND. While the datacentre's failsafe systems kept it operational, both the DataSpring and MND buildings were heavily damaged – employees and the community needed help.

Start with needs

Let's turn to the question: 'What can you bring?' Rather than a broad 'what have you got?' question, it is better to start with what you need, as this may trigger access to resources that might not be immediately apparent. In addition to much-needed cash, Komárek mobilised consultants and a construction company from KKCG's real estate pillar to advise on short-term fixes and long-term possibilities for rebuilding the town. The vision was for sustainable water management, green walls, low energy housing, electrical facilities housed underground and the reassessment of newly-damaged areas, with a view to accelerating previous discussions about green spaces to bring communities together.

As for the cash, it's rare that a billionaire will be able to clarify exactly what's on offer immediately, as needs are not always clear. However, Komárek was quick to bring 150 million Czech Crowns (€5m) to the table, 50 million of which were to be used for immediate relief and 100 million ringfenced for longer-term recovery.

Rapid funds are always helpful, which brings us to the next question: 'When can we have it?' KKFF director Luboš Veselý describes the speed of delivery



Mayor Libor Střecha, pictured on the left showing Karel Komárek the damage, said: "I knew a big part of his (Komárek's) heart remained in Hodonín. He spent much of his young life here, starting his first business selling pipes and valves to industry."

Karel Komárek Family Foundation

of support: "The commitment to fund short and long-term recovery was almost immediate and, within 24 hours of the tornado hitting, the full 150 million Czech Crowns was deposited in the KKFF account ready for distribution. This began landing in the bank accounts of impacted homeowners within seven days, bringing practical help and a big boost for morale," he explains.

'Will you let us get on with it?' is a difficult but important question to ask. You are looking to understand whether donations come with strings attached. Can practicality be allowed to triumph over the desired vision of the donor?

In discussing the recovery of Hodonín, Komárek emphasised his desire to make the city's future much improved on its pre-tornado self. He wanted to take this opportunity and funding to create improvements that affect youth, education, society, connectivity and sustainability. Komárek made his case passionately in his discussions with Mayor Střecha, but recognised he could only advocate, not dictate.

The final question is: 'Where do you fit in?'

It can be easy to be swayed by a large donation and to give a major donor a greater voice than other contributors. It is important to look at the entire amount raised and encourage contributors to put their egos aside and work together in the best interest of those they are supporting. While Komárek's was the largest single donation, it was actually only about 12 per cent of the 1.2

billion Czech Crowns raised in the first week after the tornado in an admirable show of Czech solidarity. Eight separate NGOs had raised funds and it was agreed that Komárek would focus his support on Hodonín, with others helping neighbouring villages hit by the tornado.

Similarly, funds need to be directed where they are needed, not where the highest profile results might be found. Take the sports stadium – rebuilding the roof is a powerfully symbolic project, paving the way to make good against the promise of delivering the Czech National Athletics Championships next year, and would be a fitting demonstration of the city's resilience. However, the majority of those costs would come from insurance, with aid better diverted to less iconic projects.

As Hodonín continues its road to recovery, the public/private partnership is generating a clear vision for the future. A holistic view of the whole area created by renowned architects gives real hope that the scar of this tornado will be worn with pride by a stronger, more cohesive and efficient city. If you are lucky enough to get that call, make sure everyone's aligned on the pathway to delivery of that shared vision. **CRJ**

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