

Overcoming Fundraising Fears: The Ladder Approach

by Trevor Bragdon



When I was in high school, a roofer offered me a job. The work was simple enough—lug shingles up to a roof. There was just one problem—I wasn't a fan of heights. But I was a fan of money, so I said, "Sure, why not?"

I got to work, threw a bundle over my shoulder, stared up at this ladder, took a deep breath, and eased into it, climbing a few rungs. I waited a few seconds. I started climbing again until the fear kicked in and stopped. Then, I pushed a bit further up a few more rungs, repeating this process. It took 5 minutes, but I got to the top.

My heart was racing, but the shingles were delivered, and it was on to the next bundle. The second time up that ladder was a little shorter, and each trip got a little faster as my brain realized I wasn't going to die. By lunchtime, I cruised up and down that ladder like it was nothing, ready for the next run.

Years later, I realized this was my first encounter with the **power of incremental exposure to overcome fears of phobias or fundraising.**

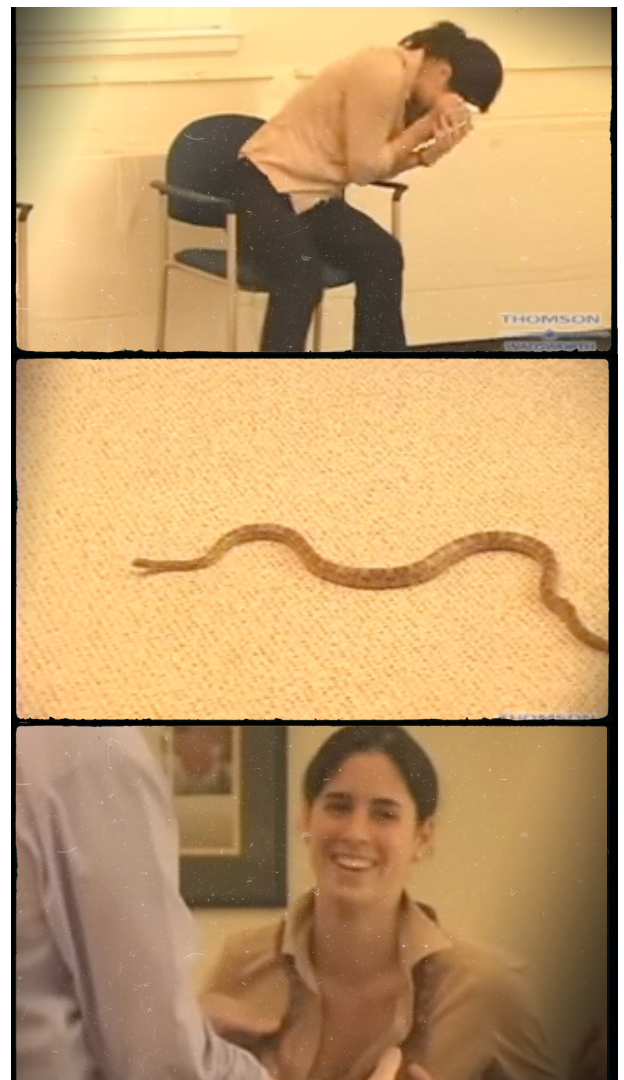
Reducing Fear

Psychologists call it exposure-based therapy, and it works on the concept that repeated, controlled exposure to a fear can diminish its impact. This approach relies on updating our predictions about the feared outcome with the reality we experience.

For instance, someone with a deep fear of snakes might expect disaster just by being close to one. Yet, with steady exposure and seeing their fears not come to life, their expectations and reactions change, reducing the fear.

There's a striking video of a woman initially paralyzed by her fear of snakes but comfortable holding a snake and draping it over her neck just a few hours later.

Fundraising might not scare people the same way as snakes or heights, but it can still be intimidating and make us uncomfortable. It's this initial apprehension that often stalls us. However, using the ladder technique, you can overcome fears and raise the money you need to win.



Deathly afraid of snakes to having a snake hanging on you in 3 hours.
Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKTpecooiec>

The Ladder Approach

1. Set a consistent time dedicated to fundraising activities.

The scheduled time creates a routine to focus on fundraising.

Example: Set a recurring meeting on your calendar for each day for 20 minutes as you get started. You block off from 6:00 to 6:20 pm each night to fundraise.

2. Set a goal for this time.

Don't set just any goal, but a process-based goal that's so small you can easily attain it. A process-based goal is a goal that relies on your effort rather than an outcome-like counting the number of phone calls but not how much you raise. You can make a certain number of phone calls, but the total raised will vary based on many factors.

Example: Your goal: Make one donor phone call.

3. Now it's time to approach the fundraising ladder.

For this step, you want to imagine a ladder placed against the wall with a task written on each rung. As you complete each task, you move up the ladder, and the tasks get harder.

Example: The first rung could be something as simple as:

- Read your fundraising script out loud once.
- Print off your call sheet/open an Excel list.

These small steps represent the first rungs on your ladder. The key is to begin with modest, easily attainable objectives.

Next rung: Write 3 bullets on what you'll say in a voicemail if you don't reach the donor.

Decide the next rung: It could be typing the donor number into your cell phone or finding them in your contacts.

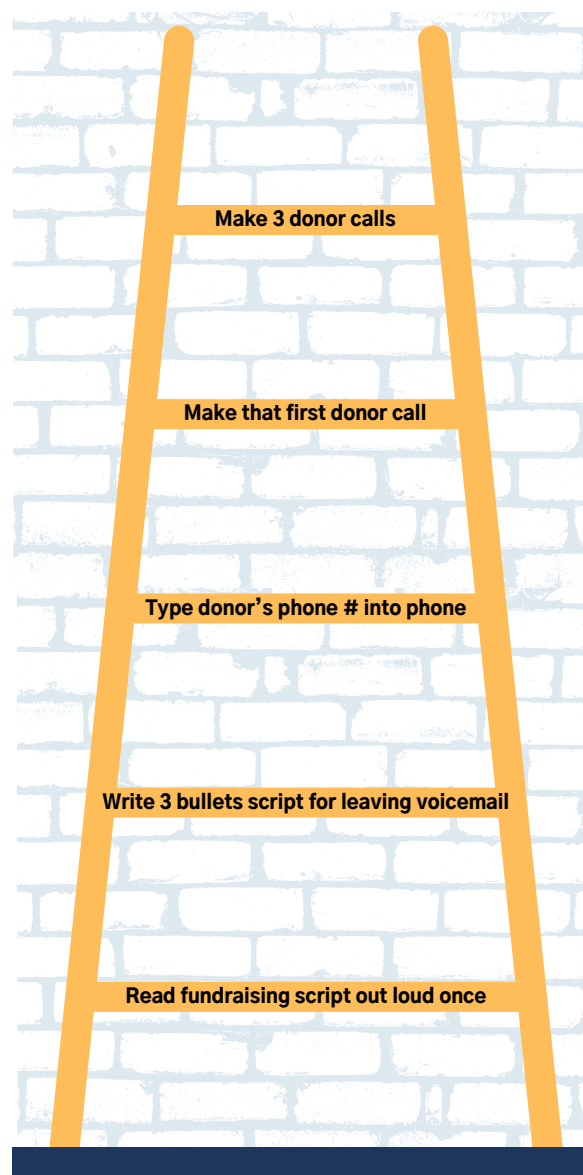
The next rung might be difficult. **Make that first call.**

Here you may find you need to pause for a minute. Remind yourself that you are not Oliver Twist begging for a donation. You are partnering with donors to change your state. Take a deep breath and hit 'call' on your phone.

You'll likely go to voicemail on this first call, but if the donor answers, you have the script.

After taking these initial steps and finding it more manageable than anticipated, increase your goal slightly. If one call was doable, aim for two more. With each successive step, the task becomes less daunting, adjusting your perception of its difficulty.

If you reach a point of resistance where proceeding feels overwhelming, it's okay to pause. Leave it for the next session if it seems impossible after a short break. This approach ensures you push yourself with gradual, comfortable progress.



The Bottom Line

The Ladder Strategy is a step-by-step method that helps overcome the initial fundraising resistance and rewires your brain's perception of the difficulty of fundraising.