SKYLIGHT PHILANTHROPY

SKYLIGHT INSIGHTS BRIEF

by Sarah Koch-Schulte, Founder and CEO, Skylight Philanthropy Inc. | 2026

Major and Transformative Gift Fundraising: What Sector Leaders Say

Over the past year (May 2025 to June 2026) I met with over sixty people who spend their lives thinking about extraordinary gifts: CEOs, Board Directors, Chief Development Officers, Directors of Major Gifts, large donors themselves, and other philanthropy leaders. They came mostly from across Canada, plus three other countries on three continents, each person with a personal tie to this country. They work in international development, arts and culture, global affairs, climate, and social services, doing the essential work of keeping democratic and civic life intact. I deliberately excluded conversations with leaders in hospitals and universities for this report, as there is a well-established history of major giving in that segment of the non-profit sector.

What follows are ten insights I kept circling back to, organized into four themes. Consider it a field report: rigorously sourced from the past year, gently opinionated, and drawn from a career of making major and transformative gift asks and coaching others to do the same. I offer these as patterns, not rules.

Leadership and Major Gift Innovation

1. Boards are an underleveraged asset, and staff leaders are often interested in changing that. Almost universally, the leaders I spoke with want support engaging Board Directors and volunteer leaders meaningfully in major and transformative gift work. The reason is often because no one has quite handed Board Directors and volunteer leaders the playbook and the confidence.

2. Even excellent leaders often want someone to support them with their top ten donors. CEOs and Chief Development Officers have told me that sustained attention on top donors is what they value. Many organizations have an appetite for developing new relationships with major donors they're not yet in conversation with, and are keen to find ways to do this.

3. Philanthropic ambition is outpacing the talent pipeline. Across Canada, more organizations than ever want to pursue complex, multi-year, seven- and eight-figure gifts. Professionals with significant experience making those asks are in high demand, and still often concentrated in large hospitals and universities.

4. Artificial intelligence experimentation is well underway. Adoption is uneven. Many people are still experimenting, yet AI is unmistakably here, and mostly self-taught. Several people estimated a thirty percent productivity gain for those using current AI tools.

A Shifting Donor Landscape This Year

5. The intergenerational wealth transfer is redirecting philanthropic priorities. Generation X inheritors are often championing different causes than the Baby Boomers and the Greatest Generation before them, whose giving leaned heavily toward hospitals and higher education. Inherited wealth, it turns out, does not arrive with inherited allegiance attached. Leaders across the sector told me the same thing: this past year, the wealth transfer moved from theory to something they could see in their own donor conversations.

6. Donors love this country, and the world beyond it, and they are not content to simply watch. Across our conversations, major donors described real urgency, and a desire to act through their philanthropy.

The Craft of the Ask

7. The simplest major gift discipline remains the same: showing up. Many organizations can continue to increase their cadence of major donor visits, the foundational habit that everything else in major gift fundraising rests on. Those who invest in this now stand to differentiate themselves.

8. Research should guide the ask. Rigorous, research-informed counsel helps leaders land on a feasible request, whether $1 million or $20 million. But timing is a matter of judgment, not formula: a transformative ask can land

beautifully on a first call or a third. What matters most is some combination of positioning, leadership, preparation, alignment, and relationship strength.

Campaign Momentum

9. Campaigns are breaking out of their old neighbourhood. Campaign fundraising is growing rapidly across Canada well beyond hospitals and higher education, bringing campaign-scale ambition to a much wider range of organizations. The trend is accelerating, not levelling off.

10. Donors want more candour, less ceremony. Leaders across the sector are rethinking how transformative donors are recognized and kept close. The direction of travel is away from ceremony and toward candour: shorter, more personal, more direct evidence of impact, often straight from the CEO. Many donors at this level want proximity to the mission, not polish.

Looking Ahead

What will set the best organizations apart over the next decade will be the vision and discipline to keep faith with the relationships that matter most, to open conversations with new people who can make large gifts, and to keep reinvesting in the fundamentals of major gift fundraising. That work starts with something simple: showing up to ask. It is not glamorous, yet it is how the whole sector moves forward, one conversation at a time.

About Skylight Philanthropy Inc. and Sarah Koch-Schulte

Skylight Philanthropy Inc. is a boutique advisory practice that helps leading non-profits raise their largest philanthropic gifts, often at the seven- and eight-figure level. The firm partners with CEOs, Chief Development Officers, Directors of Major Gifts, and Board Directors of institutions working to strengthen democratic and civic life across Canada, and with global affairs, arts and culture, human rights, humanitarian and climate causes. Skylight Philanthropy Inc. delivers major and transformative gift strategy, fundraising campaign planning, and hands-on advisory focused on securing gifts.

Sarah Koch-Schulte has spent over twenty years helping Canada and the USA's most ambitious organizations secure their largest gifts. She led the major gifts work behind the first $100 million campaign in Canadian international development history, took Milton District Hospital Foundation from 10 to 38 six- and seven-figure gifts, and grew major gift revenue 120% in a single year at Plan International Canada. Her campaign experience spans $30 million to $4 billion, including participating in the largest university campaign and the largest community hospital campaigns in Canadian history. As Founder and CEO of Skylight Philanthropy Inc., she brings that principal and major gift depth to leaders preparing for their own next transformative ask, honed through senior roles with KCI Philanthropy, King's Trust Canada, Plan International Canada, Sinai Health Foundation, and Amnesty International USA. She is a published author with Oxford University Press, and a former Board Director of Amnesty International Canada and the Association of Fundraising Professionals (Golden Horseshoe chapter). Sarah holds a MA in Planning from the University of British Columbia, was a Visiting Scholar at Cornell University, and taught at New York University. She is based in Toronto and is from the Interlake region of Manitoba.

Skylight Insights Brief is published by Skylight Philanthropy Inc. To discuss these findings or what they may mean for your organization, contact Sarah Koch-Schulte for a confidential call.

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