

Putting together an effective and successful fundraising team is akin to building the institution in microcosm. This chapter presents five fundamental success factors that come into play when building a team and makes the case for why this is important.

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Building the fundraising team

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Good character is foundation. Training is infrastructure.

ONE OF THE much-to-be-sought-after opportunities in fundraising is the opportunity to organize an advancement office from scratch, including selecting equipment, software, and office location and, most important, designing the right fundraising plan and selecting and hiring staff. Although this is heady stuff, it is also a bit unnerving because to have this opportunity invariably removes almost all of the usual excuses an advancement officer can put forth if the fundraising program is less than successful. But even with that caveat, the psychic rewards are likely to far outweigh the potential drawbacks.

The second part of the opportunity, and even more critical than selecting staff, is developing and implementing the strategy to get the institution's leaders most directly related to fundraising—chief development officer, chief executive officer, chief financial officer

and chief volunteer officer, board chair—to function as a team to accomplish agreed-on fundraising objectives.

Most of the current fundraising professionals came to this work from other areas of endeavor. Most who do the work, alternately called advancement, development, fundraising, philanthropy, external relations, and other such designations, did not choose this profession but were, in essence, chosen by it.

In the typical instance of entry into the field, a person happened to be where a need existed, expressed interest in helping to address the need, and volunteered or was drafted. He or she then sought and secured training or a mentor, or trained on the job, and in that way jumped into the mix. And “jumping” is an apt description of what the experience usually turns out to be.

This is also the route for many of the executive-level leaders in nonprofit organizations. Except for national organizations with defined in-house staff development and promotions programs and human resource departments, leaders are often hired from other sectors, business and government particularly, to fill executive director and finance positions.

While the ideal would be to have board chairs and other key volunteers come to their positions with unusually strong personal and emotional ties to the organizations they serve, in addition to strong leadership skills, those traits are probably more the exception than the rule.

As more and more higher education institutions, and particularly their graduate programs, become cognizant of the huge role nonprofits and philanthropy continue to play in ordering society and promoting community, and as they provide programs of study, more students are enrolling in programs offering degrees focused on the management and maintenance of nonprofit organizations. This circumstance will continue to give credence to the notion that fundraising and nonprofit management are professional endeavors worthy of serious study and status in academic and certification environments. The question then becomes whether this professionally trained corps will make an appreciable positive difference in the management and fundraising effectiveness of nonprofits in

the short run. That should certainly be the prospect as programs mature and more graduates are produced.

The advent of professional training and academic programs has not yet made the hiring of capable staff and the building of effective and successful fundraising teams any easier. But it is likely to be the case in the future as the academic programs mature and attract more students.

For now, building an effective and successful fundraising team requires a rare combination of the capability for focused, detailed character analysis, coupled with sensitive, intuitive judgment, all informed by experience. In short, the likelihood of success the first time out represents odds that would be quite unattractive to even the most uninformed risk taker. In spite of the risks, this is still one of the most exciting, and most critical, roles in the profession and one that is worthy of all of the time and effort that goes into getting it right. Based on personal experience in a wide variety of organizations of various sizes and complexity, there are five fundamental individual success factors for building an effective and successful fundraising team.

Success factor one: The primacy of core character

The basis of all that is important in the nonprofit sector is trust. All of the relationships—institution to community, community to institution, member to institution, institution to member, board member to board member, board to staff, staff to board, staff to staff, member to staff, and staff to member—and thousands of other day-to-day interactions are grounded and carried forward in trust. Anyone who serves in nonprofits, in a staff position or as a volunteer, must show traits that portray an appreciation for and a heightened understanding of the concept of trust and trustworthiness.

Conversations and evaluative materials designed to recruit individuals to the fundraising team must be heavily oriented in a manner to ascertain the value the individual places on trust and trust relationships. Although trust is not the only component of

core character, it is the preeminent one in a productive nonprofit environment.

Good judgment, though difficult to assess, is also a key character trait to have in those who make up the effective and successful fundraising team. It is built on the ability to examine a set of alternatives critically and then select the one that represents the choice most beneficial to the institution or circumstance. Good judgment requires the presence of a values set that encompasses a well-developed sense of ethics, morality, fairness, tradition, selflessness, and law and a profound respect for the basic worth of human personality in all of its many and diverse dimensions.

Another important index of character to be considered in building an effective fundraising team is honesty. In many ways, trust and honesty are complementary concepts. It may even be posited that one cannot exist without the other. Yet despite their seeming similarity, honesty does occupy its own niche.

Honesty requires internal confrontation with ideas and issues leading to “yes” and “no” decisions. In some instances, the choice is between an action that is self-serving with immediate institutional consequences and personal benefit or one serving with long-term institutional consequences and institutional benefits. In others, the personal confrontation relates to long-held beliefs that may be considered arcane in a particular environment.

The challenge is to stand firm with one’s belief system even when the stand may be unpopular and may result in negative consequences. Martin Luther King Jr. advised in one of his sermons that “if you don’t stand for something, you will fall for anything.” In that same sermon, he also reflected on the personal challenges that accompany taking an unpopular stand.

Honesty requires facing issues and events in a straightforward manner, reflecting on those issues and events, and taking a stand that is congruent with what one feels and knows in one’s heart of hearts. Anything short of this posture is dishonest.

Members of the effective and successful fundraising team invariably will represent individuals for whom core character is an important consideration. Core character must certainly be a critical

consideration for anyone seeking to build an effective and successful fundraising team.

Success factor two: Knowledge of and comfort with self

A. H. Maslow places self-actualization at the top of the pyramid in his hierarchy of need. He describes the self-actualized individual as the person who has achieved a level of self that allows other-directed activity and thinking to be the predominant life-ordering characteristic. The prospect of populating the fundraising team exclusively with individuals who have achieved this level is limited. Nevertheless, there is still considerable value to be had in applying Maslow's model in the search.

One of the toughest issues to address with potential philanthropy professionals is the appreciation of how to embrace the value that it is possible to accomplish more through others than by doing a job all by oneself. The argument generally made is that "to do it myself makes the whole effort a lot simpler to accomplish." Accomplishing tasks and achieving goals through others suggests the need to be self-effacing and ego free in favor of acknowledging and enhancing the egos of others.

Although there is a natural bias against this approach in most work environments, it is a necessity for survival and success in the nonprofit environment. Most of the time professionals working in a nonprofit environment will not have all of the people or fiscal resources they need to accomplish the task and strategies assigned to them. It therefore becomes extremely important to have the skills and understanding that will allow the accomplishment of more with less.

One proven way to accomplish more with less is to make efficient and effective use of volunteer resources. Coming to the understanding early on that the work is "not about you" can forecast an early paving of the road to success. Egoism is likely to be a major detractor for team building when the goal is to embrace, strengthen, and encourage as opposed to mold, train, and score.

Getting tasks done through and with other people, without an inordinate need to receive personal credit for team and institutional accomplishments is a major positive trait that an individual should bring to building the fundraising team in order to ensure its effectiveness and success.

Success factor three: Acute understanding and appreciation for the role of philanthropy and nonprofits

Working in a nonprofit is often described as “different,” and indeed it is. First, the opportunity to amass great personal financial wealth is not likely. In fact, the federal government has enacted safeguards to ensure that people who work in these venues are not paid excessively. This restriction does not speak to the huge opportunity to amass great psychic wealth. The opportunity for achieving a life full of satisfying experiences is absolutely abundant.

Second, there is a strict rule against self-inurement, which means that a board member, current employee, or anyone else related to a nonprofit cannot materially or inappropriately benefit from his or her association and service. “Inappropriately” is defined by the IRS tax codes related to nonprofits. To benefit inappropriately is a crime and can result in fines or incarceration, or both.

Third, it is unlikely that those who work for nonprofits will receive sustained public recognition for the work they do. In fact, if the job is being done effectively and right, volunteers are more likely to receive the accolades, and rightly so. The concept of servant leadership had its origin among nonprofit leaders who recognized this work to be different.

Fourth, leading by example is expected, respected, and required. The axiom that one cannot lead where one has not evidenced commitment is applied in all aspects of the functioning of nonprofits, and nowhere more frequently than in fundraising. It is difficult, if not impossible, for a member of the fundraising team to be effective if the member is a nondonor. Giving empowers one to ask with moral authority.

Staff members, particularly of the fundraising team, must understand and appreciate these verities of nonprofit life, or they are likely to become misdirected or disappointed in their career pursuits. Volunteers, for their part, should expect the quality and level of support from staff that will help to bring them success in their volunteer roles.

The effective and efficient fundraising team requires other-directed staff and staff-supported volunteers focused on institutional mission. Anything short of this approach dooms the enterprise to failure.

Success factor four: Encompassing imagination, vision, and focus

Robert Payton (1988) defines philanthropy in its essence as “voluntary action for the public good.” Because nonprofits come into existence for the sole purpose of serving a perceived public good, they are as diverse and as varied as the imaginations of those that shepherd them into existence. To suggest that they are all unique in the causes they serve would be playing fast and loose with truth. To suggest that they are all unique in their particular approach to serving the causes they have chosen to focus on is nearer to the ideal that the sector espouses.

It logically follows that those who serve the sector in fundraising capacities must be at least as imaginative in their approaches to fundraising as the imagination, vision, and focus that created the institutions they serve.

Although there are tried and true practices to attracting funding to philanthropic causes and nonprofit organizations, the application of these practices is as diverse and varied as the organizations and causes they benefit. Members of effective and successful fundraising teams are called on to “see beyond the trees and envision the forest” in the conduct of their responsibilities. They must be capable of interpreting and translating mission, goals, objectives, and strategies into fungible ideas that will attract tangible responses.

The first thought that often comes to mind when the need for vision and creative thinking is suggested is a spectacular event. The fundraising team must be careful not to allow itself to lose sight of the fact that it is individual giving that represents the overwhelming majority of the resource market for philanthropy. Vision focused on attracting individual commitment to the cause is vision well placed.

Developing the capability to meet people where they are and incorporating them and their life goals and expectancies into institutional goals and vision are, and must be, the organizing principles around which the effective and successful fundraising team functions.

Success factor five: Comprehensive job knowledge, skills preparation, and relevant experience

One might find it strange that in a discussion of five key success factors in building an effective and successful fundraising team, the last success factor discussed is job knowledge and relevant experience. In most instances of seeking to build a quality team, knowledge of job, skills level, and experience would probably be the first and most important measures of acceptability. Why is the order different in the nonprofit environment?

The divergence results from the fundamental differences that exist between the three primary sectors traditionally considered to describe and explain the functionality of America's social system. America's system of community is most commonly described as comprising business or the private for-profit market sector; the private nonprofit, philanthropic, volunteer sector; and government or the public, legislative, judicial sector.

The business sector is product and sales driven. Thus, it stands to reason that skills, job knowledge, and experience would rank high in any team-building endeavor. The less time spent on training and skills development, the more time spent on marketing, with a higher and quicker return on investment. These are primary business sector issues.

Government also is quite precise, predictable, and singularly focused in its roles of collecting and redistributing revenues for public benefit, making and enforcing laws, again for the public's benefit, and creating and managing resources, through its publicly mandated coercive authority, for the public's benefit. This sector is therefore most interested in staff and leadership that exemplify superior job knowledge, a focused skills set, and specific experience in the area of work being pursued as it looks to build teams.

In the nonprofit sector, job knowledge, skills sets, and experience are not unimportant, but they are not nearly as important as core character, knowledge of self, understanding and appreciation of philanthropy and nonprofits, imagination, vision, and focus. Without the mind-set mandated by these psychosocial considerations, just having superior job knowledge, highly developed skill sets, and years of experience could be huge deterrents to success on a fundraising team.

There is a growing trend, especially at the comprehensive university level of America's higher education enterprise, to offer courses and degree programs focused on nonprofit management, governance, and resource development. Yet although pursuing a degree in the profession may be a preferred route and the one that holds the most promise for career growth, it is sometimes not practical.

Practicality might dictate recommending one or several of the myriad opportunities for workshops, seminars, conferences, internships, and other venues to acquire skills training. A review of the Web sites for the Association of Fundraising Professionals, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, the Direct Marketing Association, and the National Council for Planned Giving will reveal many of these opportunities. The *Chronicle on Philanthropy* also lists, in each edition, opportunities for attending skills training sessions.

Although all of these avenues for skills development are important, since this work is rampant with the need for applying highly developed intuitive skills, the recommendation must be made to seek out a mentor, a senior practitioner in the field, who will take the time to help team members round out their academic and

training encounters with the lessons that only experience can teach. A popular proverb suggests that “knowledge is easy unto him that hath understanding.” Mentors, because they bring the opportunity to benefit from the experience they have earned over the years through trial and error, are fountains of understanding from which we should avail ourselves of the opportunity to drink deeply.

Assuming that we have applied all of the principles presented to build the effective and successful fundraising team to perfection, we now have the responsibility to use this dream team to its and the institution’s best advantage.

The fundraising plan: An immutable tool for success

“What is the fundraising plan?” This question is asked when the work is at a beginning stage. It is asked when there has been underperformance, misguided activity, or when the mission has not been accomplished.

Fundraising is a planned, logical, programmed, organized management function and must be approached initially from this viewpoint. It is also intuitive and affective and psychic, but it is, first, organized and focused. There are tried and true historical approaches that work; these are effective and productive, and they must be respected. Thus, the need for a fundraising plan is paramount.

The plan should be the first collaborative effort of the fundraising team. To develop the plan, team members must:

1. Internalize the mission, vision, goals, objectives, and strategies of the nonprofit organization it has been brought into existence to serve. It is impossible to speak with one voice if there is not commonality of understanding on outcomes. The road to success is paved with common understandings. It is, and shall always be, true that if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there. If the team and its members do not have a clear mental rendering of the results they expect to see when the work is done to perfection, the objective will never be achieved.

2. Become familiar with the various constituencies of the subject nonprofit organization. To design the optimum approach for attracting gifts and participation, it is critical to know as much as possible about the audience—the constituents and prospects with which one will interact. An individual, company, or foundation becomes a viable prospect when it is clear that the entity is respected enough for someone to take the time to discover what might be appealing and why. Meeting people where they are and letting them take the organization to where you and they need it to be is a powerful approach.

3. Commit to full participation in plan development and plan implementation. Half-stepping is a marching technique, similar to a vehicle's being driven in first gear. The movement is designed to showcase as opposed to cover distance. Half-stepping is not an effective approach to developing and implementing plans. In fact, moving in this manner is a decided deterrent. All members of the team must participate in plan development so that when the plan is done, all can aver ownership in the plan and be vested in its accomplishment. Anything short of commitment at that level is a forerunner to low achievement.

4. Bring personal contacts and resources to bear on plan development and implementation. Being chosen a member of the fundraising team is acknowledgment of the fact that members are well connected in the institution and in the community the institution serves. Acceptance of membership on the team is acknowledgment of the decision on the part of the member to give and get. Acceptance is also acknowledgment to all with whom the member has influence that the member becomes a personal representative of the institution and its fundraising plan. The commitment must be a no-holds-barred commitment for maximum effectiveness to obtain.

5. Serve as interpreter and facilitator for the fundraising plan to the board and other volunteer and staff groups across the institution. Members of the fundraising team become, in many ways, the marketers and salespeople for the institution because they are relating mission to resources to program to support. They are in the

unenviable position of bringing all of the success elements, the institution's *raison d'être*, together and interpreting them in a manner to elicit financial support. They must be confident that what is being presented represents the best probability for success and deserves to be supported and implemented.

Building the fundraising team is akin to building the institution in microcosm. All of the principles that contribute to success in the nonprofit institution are the same principles that redound to success in the fundraising team. In the final analysis, one must have the foresight and insight to recruit and "hire character and train skill."

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