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# Grow YOUR OWN Development DIRECTOR

BY LINDA ANN MILES

**F**ive years ago, development was not a part of my career ambitions or my training. I was just out of college, with two liberal arts degrees and a long-time interest in the politics of social change. My first job came in the form of a citywide electoral campaign. Armed with energy, I dutifully tackled whatever they put in front of me until election day. This turned out to be primarily managing contributions secured each day by the candidate and left with assistants, at front desks, and even underneath welcome mats across Portland, Oregon. My job was to pick up, record, and bank the money. Little did I know how this initial introduction into the world of fundraising would affect my future profession.

Seeking new work after the election, I stumbled on a small ad in a weekly paper asking for a “phone room manager.” The hiring organization, Oregon Right to Die (later to become the Death with Dignity National Center)

Though nonprofits generally want their development directors to be proven fundraisers, what if your small group is growing, as many are, and you don’t have the funds yet to hire someone with experience?

Why not try “growing your own?” With the right candidate, commitment, energy and a little ingenuity, you may find that you have a blossoming development director right under your fingertips.

## PICK A GOOD SEED

Experienced development professionals don’t often come cheap, and experience certainly does not guarantee someone’s commitment to your issue. If you’re hiring for a position in fundraising, focus on passion and willingness as the foundation qualities for establishing experience and retaining staff.

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had a high profile from a heated public battle in 1997 when the Oregon Legislature referred the Oregon Death with Dignity law back to the voters for repeal. (The voters defeated the proposition by 60 percent.) The position offered me an opportunity to work for an issue I believed in, and I was interested in this chance to continue political work in a professionally sustainable position.

During the more than five years that I spent raising money to promote and defend the nation’s only law establishing death with dignity, the organization changed and grew. So did I. Supported by my supervisors and working within professional networks, I took on the development skills I needed to learn.

Learning on my feet gave me a particularly interesting lens through which to view the fundraising world. Growing into the position of the organization’s first development director gave me a perspective on what it means to fill those money-raising shoes.

My employers took a chance on me. When I was hired I was put on the phone with some of the smaller donors very quickly — cutting my teeth the old fashioned way by learning how to communicate the issue with urgency, how to make a second ask, what it took to engage a donor and, as all good fundraisers must, how to take rejections in stride. This hands-on experience became an important part of my training program (see Allow to Germinate, below). As I learned the specifics of the organization’s mission, I was also learning what was most important to the organization’s supporters and how to put what I was learning into a language that would inspire them to make a gift.

The qualities of passion and willingness to learn while taking risks are touchstone traits for a fundraiser, meaning they can be returned to throughout a development professional’s career as a source of inspiration and motivation.

Along with passion and willingness to learn, there are many skills that transfer easily into the role of fundraising

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and can be markers of the potential for success. Your best candidate will likely have the following characteristics:

- Be at ease with personal and group interactions — a confident, outward personality is ideal
- Be able to listen and respond attentively in a one-on-one encounter as well as in a group setting
- Be articulate — any public speaking training is useful
- Be a strong and creative writer — journalism is great background for getting a message or mission statement across
- Be fearless in the face of rejection
- Be able to motivate others by setting a positive example

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### **ALLOW TO GERMINATE**

One of the most common problems in development work is that new staff is often expected to perform right off the bat — without a thorough training or orientation period — making for frustrated managers and early burnout of fundraising staff. Develop a training program specific to the needs of your organization and its issue. You may know the best ways to communicate your mission, but don't assume new hires will intuitively know your issue or the nuances of your most important strategies.

A new fundraiser's training program should include key organizational highlights, perhaps dividing an orientation work day into different areas of focus to encourage multi-tasking and cooperative work relationships with other staff. A first day would include an overview of organizational history — with reading material provided for more careful study at home or during the week; a short introduction to current fundraising strategies and their effectiveness; introductions to current program and administrative staff; and a general overview of how the office works.

Within the orientation week, if you are expecting your fundraiser to make direct asks to donors, take the time to role-play making an ask and dealing with common objections to giving. If you do not have a formal telephone fundraising program, create a short fundraising campaign for your new hire. Provide a list of donors giving a small average amount, say \$25 to \$50, a script to follow, consistent feedback after a call is completed, and goals for time on the phone, number of donors contacted, and percentage of positive responses.

Focusing on the quality of the contact, rather than the total amount raised, during this critical part of the training will help your new hire learn how best to communicate with donors and what motivates donors to give. Continue to use this tool throughout your training program, and pay attention to the strengths and weaknesses that emerge. If you find an individual who is excited to make these contacts with supporters, you will have come a long way toward "growing" your development director.

Leadership in the organization can provide essential background during this germination period. If the position of development director is new to your group, take the time to trace back where relationships with your most committed donors started and how those relationships

have been maintained. If possible, consider hosting a simple "meet and greet" with your strongest supporters, your new hire, key staff, and board members. This will give everyone the chance to begin to forge new lines of communication and to put names to faces.

Be sure to incorporate the fundamentals of fundraising into the training, whether your hire has experience with development or not. In an organization where the executive director has largely handled both fundraising and the organization's relationship to board members, some transfer of those relations and responsibilities needs to be done gracefully. Once your new hire has begun to build relationships, take the time to help her or him understand how fundraising decisions have been made in the past and how you would like them to be made in the future.

### **FERTILIZE AND WATER REGULARLY**

Incorporate leadership skills into the training and expectations of your new hire. Becoming a stronger leader will make the staff person feel more invested in the organization. If you have allowed for the proper germination, this process has probably already started. A good way to build your new staff member's leadership skills is to begin to involve them in the larger fundraising picture for your organization. Once they are trained and feeling confident, begin to empower your new staff member to propose innovative ideas by asking them to make an informal presentation to the staff — perhaps over a brown-bag lunch — reviewing the current fundraising program and identifying areas where they have new ideas to build fundraising strength. Conclude the lunch hour with a brainstorming

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session where other staff can build on these new ideas.

This type of a process can have multiple benefits. Your new fundraiser will be seen as a leader with new ideas among other staff members, they will be getting a review of fundraising in the organization, and you will be on your way to investing all of your staff in the process of fundraising.

A similar process can be followed in the work of the fundraiser fine-tuning the annual fundraising plan and presenting it to the board of directors, with the hope that it will interest and invest them in the fundraising process as well.

I spent many hours on the phone with our most committed supporters before I ever sat down face-to-face with a major donor, but each time I did find myself at a meeting or speaking to a group, the personal history of growing my skills as the organization grew drove my story. It gave me a reason to be there beyond my job as the fundraiser and reminded the prospective donor that I was committed to the organization because the organization had been committed to me.

## **NURTURE GROWTH**

Another key element to developing strong leadership in your new fundraiser is inclusion. No one can raise money in a vacuum, and program work is often more tied to fundraising than some on staff are willing to readily accept.

Once the new development professional has gotten their feet wet with informal presentations to staff, let executive and program staff know that for some time fundraising will be a strategic focus for the organization. Host staff meetings in which everyone on staff (and board if you can bring them in) plays with the idea of fundraising. Allow your new hire to take a role in making these meetings fun and inspiring and you will have made great strides toward an inclusive fundraising program as well as confirming the new staff person as a fundraising leader in your office.

The degree of fundraising involvement that your

not have the leeway to tap into the talent that makes up your group's strongest leaders, they may succeed to the best of their ability but they will begin treading water — a fate that means stagnation for any development program.

## **SHOW OFF THE BLOOMS**

Encourage your fundraiser to keep program staff aware of fundraising successes. Everyone loves to hear when a big check comes in the door, but don't stop there. In staff meetings, it's helpful for them to recount how a donor had come to the decision to make a large gift, particularly if this was an upgraded amount from gifts in the past. The fundraiser can share the interests and quirks of your most committed donors, working to give a picture of the individual donor and making them more of a person than a signature on a check. Program staff are often flattered by the knowledge that a donor was inspired by information the fundraiser shared about their specific program.

The development staff can also make short presentations to let the group know where they are most successful in fundraising and offering an opportunity for staff to brainstorm new ideas. With this tactic, it is important to take new ideas seriously and provide updates to staff at a later date. Ideas that do prove successful end up energizing the rest of the staff to add their ideas in future brainstorming sessions. And, of course, it is always effective to provide small humorous gifts to everyone, recognizing their willingness to think creatively.

For myself, I learned how to build a sense of teamwork in fundraising. Though always remaining respectful of their time, I would often ask program staff to review writing that I was doing to communicate program needs to supporters and grant sources. By creating this inclusive environment, I was gratified to find that facing a critical proposal deadline I could count on my fellow staff members to support my work and often provide program descriptions for me that made my work much easier.

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group will need from program staff can vary. At the least, a limited amount is needed to keep all staff keyed into the development process and maintaining a sense of fiscal stewardship as they develop program budgets. Involvement on the part of the executive director and board of directors is essential. If your group's new fundraiser does

## **KEEP FEEDING**

Many cities have formal and informal professional organizations and networks that development staff can become part of. Encourage your new hire to explore these networks and allow for time to attend meetings and become involved. A simple search on the Internet may

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turn up a local group of fundraisers that gets together for a monthly lunch to talk shop. This will likely become an outside network where your new hire can seek solutions and find new ideas.

Consider supporting continuing education for your newest development professional. Some cities have technical assistance groups, such as CompassPoint, that provide excellent daylong fundraising trainings. Your new hire should be encouraged to look into volunteer centers, nonprofit technical assistance groups, and community foundations that offer trainings on a variety of fundraising skills and provide another opportunity to meet other fundraising professionals.

The Fundraising School at the School of Philanthropy, Indiana University, is the oldest school in the country teaching the fundamentals of development. My experience there came after two years in the development field and just as I had exhausted many of the support ideas outlined above. The knowledge and facts that I gained at the Fundraising School gave me a much-needed boost in both my skill set and my confidence.

If your new hire is particularly green, you may consider fundamental support as well from a seasoned development consultant. Using this consultant's (often expensive) time wisely, a new development director will have a sounding board and a mentor.

## **IT BEGINS WITH THE ROOTS**

In conclusion, the risk the directors took to hire an inexperienced but passionate fundraiser has paid off. My role as development director and the success that I achieved was fueled by talking one-on-one with the everyday people who made gifts to the cause and by the willingness of my directors to see my professional growth as an essential asset to the organization as a whole.

Humble roots, grass roots, whatever you choose to call them, the most important gift you can give your organization if you are considering a new development professional is someone with "roots" and the proper support to grow them. **GF**

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INFORMATION ON OREGON'S DEATH WITH DIGNITY LAW CAN BE FOUND AT [WWW.DEATHWITHDIGNITY.ORG](http://WWW.DEATHWITHDIGNITY.ORG).