



# *The Executive Director & the Development Director:*

## Building the Team

by Maria Pilar Gonzales

**O**f all the relationships you will have with colleagues during your nonprofit work life as a development director, the most rewarding—and one of the most challenging—will be with the executive directors you work with. In an ideal fundraising world, we aspire to create a united front between the development director and the executive director that will give us financial and organizational success.

The executive director (E.D.) can become your best advocate and, more important, can be the best advocate for healthy fundraising at your organization. Your combined skills will educate board members, build trust in their responsibility for raising money, and endow the process with enthusiasm you'll need to draw on again and again.

First of all, let's consider the role of the executive director in development. The executive director plans the division of labor and hires the development director. The E.D. motivates and directs all fundraising activities that pertain to major gifts, in partnership with the development director. The E.D. meets with donors and asks for their financial support. The E.D. also leads cultivation strategies and media promotion, which helps create public support. Along with board members, the E.D. represents the most public face for fundraising. And, depending on the E.D.'s way of operating, you will want to be a full partner in the process for the best results.

Let's consider a couple of examples of how this relationship might not work as well as it should. On the unhealthiest end of the spectrum would perhaps be the expectation of development director as miracle worker and not as part of a team. In this situation, the development director is hired when all existing funding sources are exhausted or about to expire, and the E.D.'s pie chart of tasks is sliced up

enough to feed a party of 100. Unfortunately, the development director is now under tremendous pressure to balance all the donor relationships the E.D. struggled with, or was unable to get to, and the ones the board members let drop. As a new staff person, the development director can't possibly bring in singlehandedly the kind of money that all these people working together would be able to do—and particularly not in a short time frame.

I remember one E.D. saying to me, "Thank God we have you now. I have no time to talk to donors, and this will free me up to do other things. Now I can get my work done." Tactfully, I worked with this E.D. over several years to help her reclaim her role in fundraising.

In that organization, the E.D. had a significant peer group who were supporters—judges, lawyers, and social workers. As I clarified the division of labor through our active partnership in fundraising, we succeeded together. I coached her through donor cultivation, prepared packets of materials for her visits and arranged luncheons with donors. She became more responsive to donors and more effective in raising money through our team partnership.

Another example of a relationship lacking team spirit is development director as party planner. Hire a development officer and those shindigs will take care of your resource problems. They will make loads of money, and the E.D. will never have to ask another donor for support.

I really did meet an E.D. who asked if they could just hold a couple of gala events a year and not bother with donors. This E.D.'s organization was making the transition from depleting government grant support to developing individual donor support. Although his organization understood the idea of diversifying their support base, he

had not had any training in the fundamentals of development. I advised him to get the training first in order to hire the right development staff.

### *If you are considering a development job...*

These are only two of many stories where a director-to-director team could have made a difference. There are several ways I recommend you might avoid disasters up ahead. If you're interviewing for a development position, ask some or all of the following questions up front, and know what's acceptable to you in the way of answers *before* the interview:

- Does the E.D. embrace the practice of fundraising as a team effort?
- Do they take all the credit for raising the money for their organization?
- Do they talk about working with board members on fundraising?
- What do they do to rebuild staff energy or focus after a campaign?
- Can you imagine coaching your prospective employer in a donor cultivation?
- How do they measure success in donor solicitation?
- Do they understand they cannot control the process of people giving money?

### *After you take the job...*

Regardless of how ideal the prospective relationship seemed before you were hired, every relationship can benefit from some attention. Here are a few ways to strengthen a working relationship with the E.D., or to re-energize an already good one.

**1. Set realistic fundraising goals with your team.** Do the human hours needed to reach your fundraising goals match the real possibilities? Does your E.D. realize what an integral part of the fundraising team they are, both as a solicitor and for motivating other staff? Work with your E.D. to help create a solid team.

**2. Build a relationship.** Invite your E.D. out for a meal or coffee and pick up the tab, or at least, be prepared to offer. This is an investment of building collegial friendship worth \$20 and an hour of your time! Use the time to get to know each other a little better, and bring your ideas to the table, not your complaints—unless this time was set aside to be a true workload review.

### **3. Develop an understanding about communications style.**

Find out early on in your working relationship how your E.D. best receives information, and let them know yours. Do they like e-mail? Formal memos? Reports? Face-to-face meetings in the hall? Each of you knowing optimum ways of communicating with one another will greatly reduce your frustration and create a level of parity and respect. The first time an E.D. asked me my preferred styles of communicating I felt tremendously respected. It started a strong, long-lasting partnership that made for great success in our goals for the organization.

**4. Be compassionate.** Whether it's about time schedules or remembering donors' names, or whatever the point of tension, be flexible enough to forgive the imperfections of your E.D. Let your E.D. know how you feel when they miss an event or don't make time to prepare before a donor luncheon. Choose your battles wisely. If this is a part of their personality, they are unlikely to change on your account. But let them know their action or lack of action makes you feel isolated or devalued in the process, and will not help the campaign.

Be sensitive to limitations of time for the E.D. Although you might feel your to-do list is as imperative, other staff feel the same way about their program work. Perspective just depends on where you're standing.

**5. Be generous with your praise and applause.** Let your E.D. know when they've done a good job dealing with a difficult situation, or a public situation, or if they skillfully asked for funds when it was said "it couldn't be done." Let them know you feel their partnership along the way.

Our work takes a certain amount of emotional courage in order to deal with the volume of human contact we commit to have. As you find the ways you and your E.D. work best together, you'll find your organization more receptive to your ideas. And the confidence you and the executive director display as a team, as two people united for a worthy cause, will have tremendous influence on other staff and board relationships.

As you start your work as a fundraiser, or renew the spirit of your livelihood, you learn you can shine brightly as you give others the opportunity to shine too. I do believe the sky is infinitely large enough to hold that many stars. **GRJ**

*Maria Pilar Gonzales is the Director of Donor Activism at the Seva Foundation.*