What Bugs DEVELOPMENT DIRECTORS

BY STEPHANIE ROTH

In the November/December 2003 issue of the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal,* Mary Humphries describes the role of the "primary fundraiser" as including planning, coordinating, mentoring, evaluating, and so on. When I read the article, I wondered how many development staff people (especially development directors) identified with these roles and felt they reflected the reality of their jobs on a daily basis. I know that many development staff feel the burden of being almost single-handedly responsible for bringing in the money for their organization, which often keeps them from having the time to do the broader range of tasks that Mary Humphries described.

In an effort to get a better idea of development directors' discontents, beyond the occasional random conversations I have with my colleagues, I interviewed seven people with extensive experience in development about what bugged them the most about their jobs. Their experience covers a wide range of organizations, from those with very few paid staff to others with separate development departments of five or more people.

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Though this article focuses on the pet peeves of development directors, it was interesting to see that many of them had been in their positions for many years and were basically very happy with their jobs. Surveys have found that turnover in development positions is high — 18 to 24 months is the average length of time someone stays in a job — so I was pleased to talk to development directors who have found organizations that are open to their leadership, and who are willing to struggle with the challenges described below.

Following the list of top ten peeves, I give some suggestions for how you might respond if these are affecting your own development work.

TOP TEN PEEVES OF DEVELOPMENT DIRECTORS

1. Foundation program officers who expect that development staff can produce proposals and reports on a very short timeline. Because of the challenges of getting foundation funding and the unequal nature of the relationship between an organization and foundation funders, development staff feel a lot of pressure to respond quickly to every foundation funder's request. Other complaints about the foundation world focused on program officers who suggest that organizations "think bigger," but whose foundations don't fund risky new programs, and those who don't really understand your programs but act as if they know better than you how your organization should do its work.

2. Donors who assume their gift entitles them to special treatment. Though most major donors are happy to support the work so long as they feel kept up to date about its progress and how their money is being used, there are some who seem to feel that their check opens the door to extras, such as a seat on the board or requests that the organization not take certain political positions. In one organization that generates a lot of its income from fees for service, many donors who had made large gifts expected to get the services for free.

3. An executive director who doesn't clearly understand the role of the development director and doesn't work in partnership with him or her. Rather than recognizing that they retain major fundraising responsibilities, some executive directors feel that fundraising is out of their hands once a development director is on board. One development director recalled an executive director who was extremely reluctant to meet with donors. After finally going to a meeting with a major donor, the executive director confessed to the development director that he couldn't bring himself to ask for a gift and that he had removed the donation reply envelope from the organization's new brochure before giving it to the donor. Another development director reported that the executive director of her organization often started meetings with donors by saying, "Let's get the worst part out of the way…I'd like to ask you to give $500 to our current campaign."

4. Organizations that create programs without consulting development staff about prospects for funding or the lead time required to generate new sources of support. Though often excluded from program planning discussions, development staff can find they are expected to generate the funds for new programs, even if the likelihood of finding sources of support is extremely slim. Another gripe is with program staff who don't appreciate that it can take from six months to a year to identify, solicit, and receive funding for new program work. These situations are more likely to exist in organizations where program staff distance themselves as much as possible from fundraising (see peeves 5 and 10).

5. Program staff who don't understand that they can be more involved in fundraising. Program staff are often interacting with the various constituencies of an organization, but many don't recognize that the people closest to — and most affected by — an organization's work are the most likely to support it financially. As a result, they miss opportunities to ask people to become members or donors of the organization. Moreover, it doesn't occur to them to bring names of potential prospects back to the development office. In these organizations, development and program remain very separate aspects — each functioning at less than optimum.

6. Board members who refuse to participate in fundraising (no surprise there), and board members who agree to take on a fundraising task, then don't follow through and don't report their failing. Though board members may understand that fundraising is a part of their job description, when it comes to taking specific action, they often drop the ball. One development director explained that she was sympathetic when board members talked to her about problems they had meeting their fundraising obligations. However, she couldn't understand why others found it so difficult to just tell her directly what was going on. Development staff appreciate having honest conversations about the challenges of asking for money, and they are open to problem solving with board members and others on the fundraising team.

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7. Board members who are out of touch with the mission of the organization and don't feel real passion for the cause. People join boards for a variety of reasons, not all of them related to the mission of the organization: social contacts, returning a favor, a general desire to "do good" in the world. Development directors find it much harder to generate enthusiasm about asking for money among board members when the board members are not passionate about the work of the organization.

8. Board members (and staff) who are convinced that finding a celebrity to appear at a fundraising event is essential to its success. Many people don't understand that the cost of bringing a celebrity to an event can be enormous — including their fee (even if reduced), travel, accommodations, and so forth — and that without someone in your organization personally knowing a celebrity, it is extremely difficult to book one.

9. Non-fundraising staff and board members who use offensive or demeaning language about the process of raising money. One development director complained that her coworkers would suggest that she "work her magic," "schmooze the donors," "hit the donors up," or somehow "trick" the donors into supporting something they might otherwise have questions about if they knew what to ask. This perpetuates very old and problematic stereotypes about fundraising as a manipulative and deceitful game rather than a partnership between a community of people (staff, board, volunteers, donors, consumers, etc.) who fulfill the mission of the organization in a wide variety of ways.

10. The perception among other staff (or board) members that fundraising staff are the "money people." By separating fundraising from program in this way, these staff (and board) members imply that it takes a special (or weird) type of person to be involved in fundraising. This way of thinking leads to development staff being excluded from discussions about program priorities and direction. It also reinforces their isolation from program staff and reinforces program staff's lack of understanding that everyone involved in an organization is part of its fundraising success.

WHAT'S A DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR TO DO?

You may have observed that these ten peeves actually fall into three overlapping categories: relations with donors and funders; lack of clarity about the role of development, particularly between the development director, the executive director, and other staff; and the performance of the board of directors. The solutions to these problems are not simple and are certainly easier said than done. Many of these topics have been discussed in various *Journal* articles over the years. What follows is a brief review of some of the solutions. (You'll find more by glancing through the *Journal's* archives on our website: www.grassrootsfundraising.org) The solutions also fall into three categories.

People Can't Know What You Don't Tell Them

While it may seem risky to question the deadlines presented by funders, there is no way for them to know if their request is unreasonable unless you tell them. When funders ask for reports or proposals on an impossible deadline, try offering a timeframe that makes sense. Perhaps you have had the experience of bringing your car to be repaired or ordering a new computer component and saying, "I need this by the end of the day," and being told "That's not possible." You didn't know your request was impossible — it is not your job to know that. It is the job of the merchant to try to accommodate you, but if they can't, to tell you that.

Similarly, when funders ask for unreasonable deadlines or donors ask for favors or want their money used in a way that is not useful, it's up to you to say why that's not possible and to offer an alternative plan. Believe it or not, the funder or donor might just say, "Thanks for explaining that to me." If you develop a reputation for being not only straightforward but also open to finding solutions that will meet everyone's needs, your donors and funders will more often than not be understanding and responsive.

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Clarity About the Development Function

Development staff need to be clear about what their jobs are. Although this includes a written job description, that is not enough. Development is a function of the whole organization because it provides the money that keeps the whole organization afloat. Everyone has a role to play, with the development director being a combination of planner, manager, coach, and record keeper as well as one of many who carry out specific fundraising tasks. The executive director plays a key role in both understanding how the development function works in the organization and helping to build an organization-wide team to support that function.

While it may seem the most obvious of tasks, development is probably the most misunderstood set of jobs in the organization, which is why people often have rather absurd ideas about what is possible. One organization has had great success having brief reports at every staff meeting called, "What I wish everyone knew about my job." Each staff person describes elements of their job that they feel other staff don't quite understand or that they need help with. Keeping the conversation brief (five to ten minutes) forces staff to focus on one or two elements; asking for help often draws offers of help from other staff. In the case of the development function, many staff have expressed surprise at the number of ways they could be involved with fundraising that builds organically on activities they are already carrying out.

Getting Your Board to Raise Money

Finally, the challenges of getting boards to take on (and actually carry out) fundraising responsibilities are among the most daunting facing development staff. There are many articles and entire books written about building effective boards; here are just a few thoughts from my years of experience working on and providing training to boards of nonprofits:

- ***Board members need to be encouraged to take on tasks that they are actually willing to do.*** Board members agree to things and then don't do them not because they are irresponsible and flaky, but because they either feel pressured to say yes, or they feel they "should" say yes but then don't really want to, so they say yes and don't perform. Further, board members need follow-up and encouragement. You can't expect someone to remember that they offered to do something at a board meeting without a follow-up call or e-mail. (See also *Grassroots Fundraising Journal,* "The Importance of Follow-Up," Volume 22, Number 1).
- ***If your organization's board has never been expected to raise money, they aren't likely to be thrilled to suddenly learn that it's one of their most important responsibilities.*** It may take several years (and some turnover in board membership) before you see the kind of participation you want.
- ***Don't expect every board member to raise money.*** Work with the most responsive ones, and encourage them to find ways to motivate others.
- ***Provide educational opportunities throughout the year.*** Bring in outside experts (including friends who work for other organizations) to help board members learn things such as how to ask for money and the benefits and challenges of special events (including that celebrities are only a good idea if you actually know one).

In the end, being happy in a development job requires being as honest as you can in all your communication, and working in an organization that you truly believe in, one that understands that fundraising is a team effort. GFJ

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