Partnership, Prosperity, and Peril

Best Practices and Common Pitfalls When Development Professionals, Executive Directors, and Lay Leaders Work Together

By Kathy Cohen, Ph.D. and Nanette R. Fridman, MPP, JD

FEBRUARY 28, 2018
http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/partnership-prosperity-and-peril

Two nonprofit organizations set out to achieve the same goal: raise 15 million dollars for a new and exciting capital campaign to fund innovative programing that fully supports the organizations' missions.

Organization A enjoyed a culture of strong governance, formal written job descriptions and policies, open communication, and transparency that promoted a strong and coordinated effort among the executive director, board chair, head of development, and the campaign chairs. Organization A successfully reached their fundraising goal within their projected time frame.

Organization B… not so much. With weak governance, policies, and out of date job descriptions, confusion reigned around who was responsible for what. Both professionals and lay leaders often unwittingly worked at cross purposes, as regular, candid, and transparent communication was not firmly in place. Sometimes, it even seemed like the lay leaders were in charge. There were too few conversations among professionals and lay leaders coordinating teamwork, shared vision, and action plans. Fundraising goals were not even close to being reached within the projected time frame, and worry ensued about the organization's long term sustainability.

What is the key differentiator between these two organizations? It is the interplay between executive directors, heads of development, board chairs and campaign chairs. When done right, this quadruplet achieves fundraising goals in beautiful harmony. When done wrong, this quadruplet creates a cacophony of fundraising and other organizational trouble.

What is an organization to do? Best practice is easy to follow in theory: just do what Organization A did. Make sure you have strong governance, open communication and transparency, and a team that enjoys working together. It's not exactly rocket science, so why is it so hard to achieve?

We all know the answers. Obstacles to the institution meeting its fundraising goals and fulfilling its mission include: personalities, feelings, too many cooks in the kitchen, institutional inertia, too few resources, and meeting the needs of too many constituencies – those the organization serves, the employees, lay leadership, donors etc.

Turning Pitfalls into Partnership

Let's call out the biggest elephant in the room: some people are just so darned hard to work with! Some think they know it all, some never roll up their sleeves and do the work, some get their feelings hurt at every turn, some get irrationally angry, some have terrible personal boundaries… and on and on and on. As coaches and consultants, an enormous piece of work that we do with clients is help them manage the personalities in the office and help teams leverage those personalities to the organization's best advantage.

When it comes to employees of the organization, a strong executive is necessary to set the appropriate tone and culture of the organization. The executive director should model clear, transparent, and open communication. If a development director isn't doing satisfactory work, the executive director needs to be clear about what needs to change and by when. To get the best out of employees, objectives need to be both easily understood and tangible. If the development director is not getting the necessary support from the executive director to meet fundraising goals, the development director needs to be clear in an open and transparent way about what resources need to be put in place to achieve fundraising goals. When these kinds of clear and candid conversations occur regularly, the team has ample room to brainstorm, take advantage of available resources, and determine the best solutions.

As for lay leaders, it can feel very scary to be open and honest with them about deleterious behavior. After all, nonprofits can't stay sustainable without their volunteers who roll up their sleeves and provide free labor or donors who supply necessary resources for the organization to meet its mission. And yet clear and candid communication, both before people take on their roles and after, is necessary here too. Volunteers need to be made aware when they behave poorly, and those who work with them need to understand how they can best leverage their volunteers for productive work (see our article in eJP about Board Members Behaving Badly for a more thorough discussion on how to manage difficult lay leader personalities).

All of this is easier said than done, and where there are significant cultural issues within an organization, we strongly recommend addressing the issues with a consultant or coach before you begin a major fundraising campaign. Assuming a generally respectful and productive organizational culture, we recommend five foundational steps to set key relationships up for success. Regarding the executive, director of development, board chair, and campaign chairs:

Each of the four roles needs a specific job description that clarifies the work assigned to each role. Is it expected that the board chair will attend every parlor meeting to raise money? Is it expected that the executive will make a thank you call to every donor? The job descriptions must be current, and every member of team should meet to look over the job descriptions together. This is the time to make sure that all members of the team feel comfortable with their job descriptions, find out where people need more support, and make sure that the right people are doing the right pieces of work. Don't assume campaign chairs know exactly what that job entails for your organization, even if they have been campaign chairs before. Further, you do the organization a disservice if you expect an executive to know automatically what steps need to be taken to achieve campaign goals. This is particularly true if the executive hasn't already had prior experience with a campaign of this size or for this particular organization.

The campaign needs a strategic work plan that explicitly assigns responsibility, and accountability. Responsibility designates who is tasked with specific actions. While accountability refers to who ultimately owns the oversight. For example, the development director is accountable for the entire donor packet, even though different people may be responsible for producing different pieces of the packet: the marketing department could be responsible for the new logo while the development associate or the campaign counsel is responsible for working with the outside writer on the case for giving – and on and on. The development director serves as the point person who oversees and coordinates every piece of the work that needs to be done to produce the donor packet. Thus, the development director is accountable for the donor packet while overseeing those who are responsible for different pieces of it. Together, when responsibility and accountability are part and parcel of campaign strategies, the best action plans are created that include goals, due dates, and tasks assigned. The campaign plan and all associated materials should be kept in a shared work file that all of the key players can access.

All four primary actors must meet regularly – weekly or bi-weekly – to assess the prior week(s)' progress, preview upcoming activities, and discuss what each person needs to do to make the following week's work successful. This is a good time for the team to discuss what is working well, what is not working well, and how the team can be more productive together. This is also an excellent opportunity to build relationships among the team as you share your frustrations and celebrate your successes together. One tool that we find very helpful in our practice is the "Start, Stop, Continue" exercise. Each member of the team has an opportunity to share with the group what the team needs to start doing, what the team needs to stop doing, and what the team needs to continue doing. This exercise is a wonderful way to ensure open and frank discussion as well as a shared vision and strategies.

Reporting at board and staff meetings should include acknowledgements of the efforts of all four actors (and the campaign committee and board – hopefully!) and the team should celebrate successes together. Any campaign needs to be a top priority not only for the campaign leadership team, but for the entire board of trustees.

Further to our point above, and this may be the most important point of all, we cannot emphasize strongly enough the extraordinarily important role of the board of trustees in fundraising. Most boards designate the director of development and the executive director as the two people who are accountable and responsible for all fundraising. We are here to say loud and clear that when a board does that, it is truly passing the buck. Ultimately, the board of directors is the fiduciary of the organization and responsible for both the expense and revenue sides of the equation. Campaigns are rarely, if ever, successful without leadership giving from board members and the deep involvement of the board at every stage of the campaign.

These are foundational steps to overcome institutional inertia and motivate the campaign team to work in harmony toward successfully achieving campaign goals. Though they initially create more demands on personal schedules, they ultimately save time, headaches, and heartaches down the road. Our greatest hope is that the professionals and volunteers keep their eyes on the prize to model a can-do attitude, and a culture of abundance that can lead to raising funds in the near and long term and set the organization up for a bright future.

Kathy Cohen, PhD, is a Clinical Psychologist and experienced nonprofit board president who provides governance and development consulting and coaching for nonprofit organizations. Her practice is focused on helping nonprofit executives and boards become more focused, efficient, collaborative and impactful. She can be reached at kathy@kathycohen.com

Nanette Fridman, MPP, JD, is founder and principal of Fridman Strategies, a consulting firm specializing in strategic planning, financial resource development, governance and leadership coaching. She is a frequent speaker, trainer, workshop presenter and facilitator. Nanette is the author of “On Board: What Current and Aspiring Board Members Must Know About Nonprofits & Board Service.” She can be reached at fridmanstrategies@gmail.com