We’re all fundraisers here…right?

If you write grant proposals, manage grant funds, research prospects for grants, or perform any other aspect of grant development – you’re a fundraiser. However, many grant professionals don’t think of grant development as fundraising. They don’t see the similarities between the functions grant professionals perform and those of traditional fundraisers—such as conducting annual appeals, overseeing major gift solicitations, and designing and implementing fundraising events. This arbitrary divide between grant development and traditional fundraising is not useful and, moreover, it’s invalid. While different in overall writing, style and tone, expectations, target audience, and source of funds, the grant development profession is not separate from, but rather part of, the broader fundraising landscape.

What Underlies this Arbitrary Divide?

Some grant professionals work in “small shops” where all fundraising, including grant development, is done by one person or a team of just a few people. In this case, it’s “all hands on deck”; there’s no separation in roles. You may write a grant proposal one day, and an annual appeal the next.

My first job out of school was in an environment like this; I focused on annual giving and donor relations just as much as on grant writing. For a long time I wasn’t aware that others might experience a divide between traditional fundraising and grant development. I’m thankful for that foundation because what I learned from traditional fundraising made me a better grant writer. It also drove me to seek both the Certified Fund Raising Professional (CFRE) and Grant Professional Certified (GPC) to round-out my fundraising expertise.

Unfortunately, many organizations don’t foster collaboration between grant professionals and traditional fundraisers. The larger the development function, the more likely the work will be done in silos. As a result, grant professionals miss out on the opportunity to learn from skills that traditional fundraisers excel at and visa-versa.

How Can You Change This Dynamic?

You may have to be the catalyst for change. This takes effort, but the outcome is worth it; everyone will be more successful as a result. Grant professionals must recognize and articulate the unique skills and value they bring to the fundraising table. In turn, traditional fund development professionals must make sure grant professionals are seated at the table.

How do we begin to move to a more collaborative working relationship? Here are some things I’ve found useful:
1. **Build Bridges:** Ask to see that you (the grant professional) are included in all fund development discussions. Be inquisitive and show interest in learning about traditional fundraising. Make suggestions about traditional fundraising methods, drawing on what you bring from the grant world. Share techniques that you’ve found to be effective in engaging funders. Your grant proposal to the local small family foundation could be repurposed for a personalized letter to a potential major funder.

2. **Share Boilerplate:** Most likely, both traditional fundraisers and grant professionals use similar language to “sell” the mission of the organization. Suggest an annual audit of messages used in your organization’s fundraising materials and grant applications to make sure everyone is using consistent and accurate information, and working from the same boilerplate. Also, share what you’ve found to be effective in engaging funders; stories and statistics that you use in grants can easily be repurposed for appeal letters and vice versa. This will reduce the need to reinvent content, making everyone’s job easier. It will also ensure that your organization is consistently represented among all stakeholders.

3. **Update Your Case:** Examine the case for support together and make sure it still includes relevant and consistent information. Then, consider ways to repurpose it, such as for talking points for board members or for a direct mail piece. Through the process of working together you will make huge strides in improving collaboration, which will result in greater impact for all fundraising efforts—both grant development and traditional fundraising.

**Learning from a Key Skill of Fundraisers: Networking**

Most grant professionals understand that the better you know a program officer at a foundation, the better you are able to frame your proposal and the more likely it will be considered. But, getting to that point takes effort. It’s not just about picking up the phone, but more about using good networking skills.

Grant professionals should take note from their fund development counterparts who typically excel at building and maintaining one-on-one relationships. Relationship-building is a must for grant professionals. However, it can be a challenge to find time for this when you must spend a significant portion of your working hours writing. Stewardship can, and must, be incorporated in to all facets of fund development, including grant development.

This takes getting out of the office and discussing the mission with those who are interested. Here are some ways to do that:
1. **Do your homework:** Find out whom in your organization may be connected to people associated with the funder. For example, several grant research systems provide information on foundations’ board members. From there, you can identify the connections that leaders in your organization may have with the funder. You can ask these leaders for help in outreach to the funder and even invite them along to an in-person meeting.

2. **Be prepared:** Have your talking points ready. You know your organization inside and out – you write about it every day. Identify significant facts and figures that will illustrate the impact of your organization, and will demonstrate its alignment with the funder’s interests. Ask your program staff for stories of people served by your organization that you can share with funders to bring your organization’s mission to life. Doing so will make it easier to engage in conversations and will make your organization stand out from others and be memorable.

3. **Create networking opportunities:** Once you find individuals you’d like to connect with, plan for interaction. It IS part of your job – you’re sharing the mission and programs with representatives of potential donors: program officers. Meet for coffee, invite them for a tour of your facilities – ask about their goals and objectives over the next year, how you can help in achieving them.

4. **Stay in touch:** Connecting with someone and then making a straight ask to be invited to apply for a grant may be effective, but it doesn’t build a long-term relationship. Build a strong relationship by staying in touch with the funder, providing information and updates that are useful to them professionally. Interact with them not just in the context of their role with the funder, but also as people. Offer your assistance with their projects or ideas.

With a little effort and innovation, grant professionals can break through any barriers between the traditional fund development and grant development worlds. Take the initiative to make changes and encourage sharing of information and techniques. Doing so will round out your skill set and make you a more valuable and effective grant professional.

*Ericka Harney, CFRE, GPC, CVA is the executive director of Accounting & Financial Women’s Alliance and The Foundation of AFWA in Lexington, KY. She teaches annual and major gift fundraising for North Park University’s Master of Nonprofit Management program. Ericka is a frequent speaker at national and regional GPA conferences and other nonprofit events. She can be reached at Ericka.Harney@AFWA.org.*