Advice to (Young) Fundraisers

Wednesday, January 25, 2012

Contributed By: Teri Blandon
Published By: CharityChannel

After deciding to move to another job, I was cleaning out ten years’ worth of files when I came across an old email I had written in 2005. At the time, I had been interviewed by the Chronicle of Philanthropy for an article on managing fundraisers who were new to the profession, and the reporter had asked me to provide some thoughts on what advice I would give to people who were just starting out.

As I read through what I wrote six years ago, I realized that the advice was still relevant for me, a nonprofit veteran of twenty years. With some minor updating, I share it with you. I hope you find it useful as well.

1. Learn from everybody. Even “bad” managers have something to teach about how not to do something. But be sure to think analytically about what you like about “good” managers and work to emulate those traits.

2. Seek variety. At a recent employer, I’ve raised funds for a range of purposes, from the history of the deaf community in the U.S., to classical music concerts, to television equipment. By embracing variety, you will learn a lot about many different areas.

3. Avoid tunnel vision. While you may be in the development department, be sure to seek out managers in finance, human resources, governance, legal, programming, communications, operations, etc. Learn about what they do and how it fits into the overall structure of the nonprofit. Likewise, learn about other development functions. If you are a grants professional, find out all you can about direct mail, telemarketing, major giving, capital campaigns, volunteer management and planned giving. The more you know, the more you will understand how fundraising fits into the whole – and your knowledge will help advance your career.

4. Follow your heart. You have to believe in the value and importance of your employer to be an effective fundraiser. If you don’t believe in it, you can’t sell it.

5. Attend workshops. I take advantage of every professional development opportunity I can. You will learn from the expertise of the presenter and the experience of your fellow participants. The experience can also increase your self-esteem as you realize you have something to offer others.

6. Avoid isolation. You need to connect with other people and build networks on a regular basis, no matter how busy you are. The Grant Professionals Association and the Association of Fundraising Professionals have been extremely valuable to me. Social media tools such as LinkedIn also help me to keep in contact with people. You will learn and you will share.

7. Beat your fears. What do you least like to do? Write? Start keeping a journal or write an article for CharityChannel’s Grant & Foundation Review. Hate to talk on
the phone to strangers? Volunteer for the phone-a-thon at your local public broadcasting station or your alma mater. Tremble at the thought of public speaking? Join groups like Toastmasters or volunteer to give a presentation at your local school or religious institution. Whatever is your biggest professional fear, learn to overcome it or it will hold you back.

8. **Be strategic.** Periodically, stop to think about where you are in your career and where you want to go. If you feel as though you are not respected for your skills and experience at your current position, it might mean that you’ve gone as far as you can go. Move on.

9. **Stretch to the next job.** You probably won’t be hired for a position for which you don’t have any experience, but you also don’t want to take a job that is exactly like the one you hope to leave. You’ll be bored in no time. That doesn’t mean that lateral moves are never a good idea; in those cases, you should be going to something that will be a challenge, such as a different programmatic focus. Look at your past experience and determine what job responsibilities you’d want to keep in your next position and which you would like to do more of.

10. **Give back.** Take every opportunity to share your knowledge. Present at [Grants Professional Association](#) workshops. Contribute to online discussions. Volunteer at other nonprofits. Participate in a professional mentoring program. While you’re giving back, you’ll also learn.