

Interesting Things Heard

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As a professional in the field for more than thirty-five years, it is interesting to engage in conversations with fundraising professionals about situations in the workplace. While the technology has changed and our ability to communicate with donors has improved greatly, it seems we have not progressed in utilizing staff and understanding the human relations problems within our staffs

I would sum up the situation in this way: We continue to relate to our donors well, but we do not relate well to our most important resources, our own people. We do not set appropriate expectations at many levels.

I attend regular meetings of professional organizations in the area and consult in the region. I hear about problems of Boards of Trustees (Directors) not motivating and respecting staff talent and ability which can result in morale problems. Senior leaders in nonprofit businesses do not communicate with staff effectively. New fundraising professionals seem to want to move before they learn the basics. All of these dynamics create frustration across the field and unnecessary movement from place to place.

Boards create discontent because these individuals do not understand their own role in the institution. This malady is a result of several factors:

- Many Board members have the impression that being on a nonprofit board is similar to what they perceive is the role of a corporate director in a “for profit organization”. Their impression is they are not responsible for the success of the organization; that is the job of management. Nonprofit boards hold the nonprofit *in trust* for the benefit of the community. The term “in trust” means literally you as a board and as individuals are responsible to the community to insure the organization follows its mission, provides services it has defines as meeting its mission, and the nonprofit remains financially viable.
- This situation exists because Boards of Trustees (Directors) do not have system for vetting candidates and a system of training and motivating new members to make them productive. An active Board Development Committee (Committee on Board Succession) with proper procedures and planning, the problem can solved and an effective, dynamic board created. The Nonprofit Companion has produced several articles on this topic in the last 18 months.

- While a Board should not micromanage the organization, individual Board members must be active on behalf of the organization. The Board has four major roles: 1) **Policy-maker** – define the concept/mission of the organization, to be the guardian of the mission, to set goals, and to approve plans for reaching those goals within the mission; 2) **Steward** – insist on sound business management principles for the protection of the funds and properties of the organization; 3) **Ambassador** – interpret the programs, policies, and objectives of the organization to others; 4) **Builder** – responsible for building and sustaining a comprehensive development program to ensure the long-term ability of the organization to fulfill its mission

- The lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities can result in:
 - The CEO is not receiving support in gathering resources. Recently, a new Director of Development made the first report to the nonprofit board of her organization. When the presentation was finished she with the support of the CEO asked for support from the Board. Several Board members stated that that is why they authorized the CEO to hire her; they did not consider it their responsibility to give, cultivate, or ask others to support. ***What is their responsibility?***

 - A CEO reported that the board stated that as the major grant expired last year, the Board decided to hire a new CEO so that person could find the funding to keep the eighteen year old organization going. ***Why did the Board not hire someone to build on the grant?***

 - In early 2013, a well respected regional program for homeless people closed its doors after forty years. The community had provided support for the feeding program with thousands of volunteer hours each year. The leaders of the board stated the reason for closing was “funding support from traditional sources had “dried up”. ***Why did the Board and the staff leadership not seek other sources before it was too late?***

Advancement professionals at various levels have difficulty in defining their contribution to the nonprofit. The symptom of not knowing the responsibilities of a position occurs within organizations as well. As technology has improved our processes, we have introduced new media of all kinds and try to think of new tricks to reach our donors, but we do not make efforts to improve our communication with our staff.

- Senior managers are assign goals without input from the staff member(s) who are charged with achieving the goals.

- Managers seem to forget what skills a person brings to a position and where there may be deficits on skills that are needed to achieve organizational goals.
- Professionals do not have leaders who inspire confidence in the work force.

Most professionals have chose nonprofit careers because their personal goals to add value to the lives of others and they align with nonprofits as a way to achieve their goals.

- The experiences of the work often come into direct conflict their goals. While the bottom line for most nonprofits is “funding to support programs” many times, the funding (The Numbers) become the driving force. In some cases, organizations are guilty of creating a program because a source of funding is available for a program the organization can create. What is really happening is the nonprofit has established a new program because someone is concerned about the amount of dollars being raised, not whether the new program will better serve the current clients of the nonprofit or if there is an effective nonprofit already serving this client group. These actions can and cause “mission drift or mission creep.” The organization may venture into a service area where other nonprofits are already operating effectively and where the nonprofit has little or no experience. If funding dries up, the nonprofit is “stuck” with another under funded program. ***Will this kind of action be accepted by others funders, or how does the staff analyze its own position when the mission becomes unclear?***
- In difficult economic conditions, or when a major funding stream is lost, or when a person leaves the organization, the tendency is to add more responsibility to the workforce already in place. Recently, a major organization has lost two key mid-level development officers. The responsibilities have been divided among the three remaining staff positions. No additional support was offered. The overall objectives and goals of the department have not been adjusted. ***How valuable will the remaining staff feel without any opportunity for input into the decision of how to adjust to the new reality? Can three people do the work of five successfully for any long period of time? Based on the new reality, are there tasks that can be eliminated or curtailed? Will there be other staff losses?***
- Recently, an organization reduced the opportunity for staff to participate in local professional meetings and to attend professional development seminars in the region. At the same time the

organization announced a reduction in expected salary increases. While financial difficulties are a constant in world of shifting resources, we need to reflect on the use of financial resources to motivate and reward staff.

- ***Has the leadership considered the impact of these decisions on the staff? Are cuts necessary in both areas? How do “perks” add job satisfaction that go beyond the daily grind and the daily frustrations?***

Looking at these six examples above, I wonder how these common problems can be diminished. I recognized the frustration of dealing with multiple priorities and multiple forces and the continuing pressure of time. I will make these suggestions:

1. I have learned over thirty-five plus years that tapping into your own professional network is a valuable resource. As your career has grown and you have moved and your colleagues have moved you have established great contacts that you respect and admire. These people have a skills set you can utilize. What better way to honor a colleague than by asking their advice. Sure they are busy, but a phone conversation or a visit for a few hours in their place can help to clarify your challenges. Your colleague can help identify matters that are not on your “radar” screen and provide timely advice.
2. A second way to get advice is to invite a colleague to become a one day consultant for you. Of course, you should offer an honorarium. Engage someone who is close to your location to avoid travel and lodging expense. This step requires more preparation on your part. You need to decide if this is closed session where it is only you and the colleague, or a more open event where some of your staff may be involved. You and your colleague need to discuss what you wish to achieve from a one day consult. Be open about his type of event with your board and staff because they will better understand you are trying to improve processes and utilization of human resources.
3. Another way to achieve the same result is to hire a professional consultant. I recognize this sounds self-serving. Based on what you deem are the needs, a face-to-face a short term engagement with a consultant can provide more in depth analysis and amore detailed set of recommendations related to suggested changes that will improve you organizational outcomes.

Any of these techniques may provide a new look from critical and friendly eyes and solutions to make your life simpler and more rewarding.

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