Creating a *Culture* of *Fundraising* in your Organization

BY STEPHANIE ROTH

Monica, the development director of a small legal services organization, called me recently. She had just received a grant to pay for some board development training with a focus on fundraising. Many of the group's board members have been on the board since the organization was founded eight years ago. They are very committed to and involved with the work of the organization. However, they have never done any fundraising, and the executive director felt they shouldn't have to since they were making a contribution in other ways. Monica asked me if I would conduct a one-day training to try to persuade board members to participate in fundraising.

My friend Estelle is development associate of a women's health organization. Prior to taking on this fundraising position, Estelle was an activist working on a variety of women's health issues. She has experience in organizing and public speaking and knows the issues well. When she was hired by this organization, she expected she'd continue to be involved in the issues — discussing program plans, writing about the issues for the organization's newsletter, and participating in various organizational projects. Eight months later, she is disillusioned. She barely interacts with staff outside of the development department and the only conversations she has about the work are related to the content of fundraising appeals and grant proposals. Her opinions about political strategy and program priorities are not solicited. Estelle feels that she is losing touch with what excited her about the work in the first place.

These two situations may sound familiar to you. They point out two sides of an issue that many fundraising staff struggle with: the separation of fundraising from program. Creating a culture of fundraising means understanding that fundraising must be integrated into all aspects of an organization's work and structure. However, it also means not isolating the fundraising staff from program discussions, plans, and activities.

In my work with organizations around the country, I find that one of the biggest obstacles to fundraising success is groups' inability to mobilize diverse people in the organization to participate in fundraising activities. Staff and board members come to trainings to learn the skills and strategies, but only a handful of people end up actually doing any fundraising work. As consultants like me make their living trying to entice board members and others to participate in fundraising, we often leave out the bigger picture — the need to integrate fundraising and program work.

There are two aspects to the problem of getting people to raise money: one is people's socially conditioned reluctance to ask for money; the other is the status accrued to "program" versus "fundraising" work. Program staff are often seen as having a deeper understanding of the issues and of the political terrain in which the organization functions. Fundraisers, on the other hand, are seen as technicians with skills to carry out specific tasks that have little to do with the mission of the organization.

As organizations grow and create not just fundraising positions but whole development departments, the problems increase. Fundraising gets more professionalized. Not only do the program staff not want to be part of the development team, the fundraising staff come to feel they're the only ones whose role it is to bring in the cash.

Turnover in fundraising staff is often far higher than for non-fundraising staff. I frequently hear complaints about how hard it is to find a good person to fill a fundraising position. Well, no wonder! Fundraisers are seen as doing the work that no one else wants to do, but not as having the programmatic skills, political vision, or connections to the issues that would make their jobs more interesting and their contributions to the work more powerful. By ignoring these potential strengths, an organization loses some valuable input from key staff people as well as a way to decrease turnover in their development department.

When an organization embraces a "culture of fundraising," in which fundraising and program responsibilities are shared among staff and integrated with each other in their planning and implementation, these problems lessen, if not disappear.

The following are ten ways organizations can start to build a culture of fundraising.

Ten Tips for Creating a Culture of Fundraising

1. Send staff and board to fundraising trainings — not just once, but periodically as the need for greater skills arises. Helping staff and volunteers get the basic skills from a one-time training is extremely useful, but

providing regular opportunities for trainings in specific areas — such as asking for money, organizing house parties, or writing effective letters — will build more skills among a broad group of people in your organization.

2. Don't segregate fundraising from program activities. When planning for either fundraising or program work, invite input from people whose primary work is in the other sphere. It is important that fundraising not be relegated to one or a few people in a development office, but distributed among board members, non-fundraising staff, and volunteers. This is a practical approach, as it increases the opportunities for money to be raised and distributes the workload among more people, but it is also a political one, as it recognizes that asking people to support your group's work through their financial contributions is a form of organizing a constituency. People who give you money can also be called on to take political action on behalf of your group — whether by writing letters, attending demonstrations or other actions, or talking about your work to their friends, neighbors, and colleagues.

Another part of this equation, however, is giving fundraising staff opportunities to share in the program work by actually having responsibilities traditionally associated with program or by being part of the planning, problem-solving, and evaluation that goes on around program work.

3. Set aside time once or twice a year at board or staff meetings to discuss some aspect of money and our society's attitudes about it. You can start with an old favorite: "What are your earliest memories of money and what were the messages you got about money from your family, your community, or your school?" From there, the group can come up with topics they want to pursue, such as whether money can be considered "dirty" or "clean," the role of taxes and the government in funding the work we do, and so on. These conversations are extremely useful in helping people become more forthcoming about money in general and more comfortable when talking to donors. Greater comfort among board and staff in speaking about money will not only give your fundraising a boost, it will also increase your level of engagement with each other about issues that affect your work. This helps build morale and a sense of shared involvement.

4. Make sure you have representation of staff, board, volunteers, and members for each fundraising activity. Special events are one type of fundraising activity that often involves a volunteer committee of board members and others along with staff support. But what about direct mail campaigns, or small-scale phone-a-thons to a targeted part of your list? Major donor campaigns, too, will raise more money if you make sure to include people on the committee who represent different constituencies of your organization.

5. Develop specific ways for people to get involved. One of the biggest mistakes I see groups make is to bring a fundraising consultant in to conduct a training with the board but not have a campaign or project for board members to get involved with immediately. Telling board members or volunteers that they must engage in fundraising but leaving it up to them to figure out exactly how doesn't work. For folks who are reluctant to have anything to do with fundraising, find simple tasks that aren't so threatening, such as adding personal notes to letters or making calls to thank donors for their gifts. Later they can move on to ask for money or plan a house party.

6. Create an annual pledge form on which board members indicate what they are willing to do that year in the area of fundraising (and giving). In addition to specifying various activities they can choose from — such as joining the special events committee, participating in phone-banking or a major donor campaign, or selling raffle tickets — you can give board members the option to decide for themselves how they want to participate. This often gets more positive results than giving them a pre-selected, non-negotiable set of tasks to carry out.

7. Leadership from the executive director and the chair of the board are critical. They both need to support the notion that fundraising is a shared responsibility among all members of the organization. If the executive director believes that the development staff are responsible for doing all the fundraising for the organization, then other staff will follow that lead. Similarly, if the board chair is not doing their share of fundraising and of encouraging and motivating other board members, it is unlikely that you will have much participation from the board as a whole.

8. Celebrate your fundraising successes. Make sure people are recognized and rewarded for their contributions, even if there isn't a lot of money to show for them initially.

9. Use an organizing model to get people involved. If you're starting with a completely resistant group of people on the board or staff, don't try to recruit everyone to the cause at once. Approach those who seem most open and use them to help convert others to the work. Don't worry so much about the people who complain and argue that they shouldn't have to raise money; concentrate on those who understand why it's important to be involved and others will eventually follow.

10. Make a commitment to create a culture of fundraising, knowing that it may take some time. Keep in mind that changing an organization's culture can sometimes take years. Don't give up too fast. **GFJ**

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