

Your Career

Ideas and resources to help advance your career

By Katherine Bella, CFRE, and Pamela A. Cook, ACFRE

Your work is not a static activity, and over time you will accept additional responsibilities and acquire more experience and credentials. “Your Career” is designed to help readers prepare for the new opportunities and challenges they will encounter as professional fundraisers. If you have suggestions or information you would like to share, or if there is a topic you would like to see addressed, please email ap@afpnet.org.

Coach!

“The intense competition has led to expensive, time-consuming searches that can take up to a year, high turnover among fundraisers who are being aggressively courted and escalating salaries that many charities simply cannot afford.”

—“Fund-Raising Frenzy,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, Aug. 9, 2007

Indeed, this is a time of unprecedented opportunity and demand for development professionals, especially those experienced in planned giving and securing major gifts. The AFP job postings alone include more than 400 listings each week. Despite this heightened demand for development professionals, why do many struggle to succeed in development positions? How can they acquire the skills they need to advance? With the shortage of skilled fundraisers, why is it difficult for individuals from other professions to transition to development roles?

There are several reasons why fundraisers do not succeed and choose to leave their current positions or leave the profession altogether. Sometimes there is a mismatch from the beginning because the prospective development professional did not ask the right questions before accepting the job. There may be issues of personal chemistry and organizational or cultural fit. In other instances, an organization may not appropriately or accurately describe a position. Or, once a job has been accepted, expectations may change with new leadership at the staff or board level. The needs of an organization also may change over time, and there may be a requirement for enhanced skills in areas such as technology, budgeting, major gifts, research or direct mail. Furthermore, some organizations may encounter financial problems that would require layoffs.

As daunting as these challenges appear, and despite the fact that certain aspects of the job and situation cannot be changed, there are important actions that development professionals can take to improve the odds:

- Develop clear and realistic expectations around how much money can be raised, over what time period and by whom

- Clarify how development time and energy should be allocated
- Determine how to measure and report performance
- Enhance skills through continued training
- Build a support network

In order to accomplish these objectives and acquire and improve needed skills, seeking help and advice from mentors, trainers and coaches may be one of the most valuable decisions fundraisers can make.

Who Are Your Coaches?

According to Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/coach>), a coach assists people (clients) to achieve their goals with goal setting, encouragement and discussion. A coach helps people find their own solutions by asking questions that give them insight into their situations. In addition, a coach holds clients accountable, so if they agree to a plan to achieve a goal, a coach will help motivate them to complete their plan.

In development, a coach can help development directors, executive directors and nonprofit organizations as a whole to set and clarify goals, become trained in key areas that will advance the development effort, and build appropriate and realistic measurement tools to assess performance and ensure growth. A coach can bring specialized skills to a nonprofit and can serve as an internal and external ally and advocate.

Development coaches can take many forms. While some of the best coaches may meet with you face-to-face, effective coaches also can work virtually or can make themselves available through support networks. You can work with more than one coach at the same time, depending on your needs. Some examples of possible coaches include:

An AFP mentor. Many AFP chapters provide formal programs that match an experienced member with an individual with less experience. This coach can be a great confidential source of information about the field and best practices.

A network of advisers. You can establish your own set of peer advisers from other similar organizations. In this coaching model, you meet with a small group of people confidentially to discuss issues, brainstorm about the best development practices and provide support to one another.

A volunteer from outside your organization. An individual from the outside can bring specialized skills to assist you in your work. Some individuals, including board and community members, can be recruited to volunteer their time and energy for major tasks such as developing a marketing plan or managing a special event. Board members from other nonprofits are often willing to attend other organizations’ board meetings to talk about their experiences in fundraising and thereby inspire and educate another board. These kinds of coaches may be specific to a task, or they may have skills that will enable them to provide guidance over a broad spectrum.



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A volunteer from inside your organization. Finding an individual who can help you navigate the organization can be a great aid to you in your work. This coach can help to clarify official procedures, such as how to submit expense reports or where to pick up benefit forms, as well as provide insights into organizational history, office politics and pet peeves of key players.

A paid professional coach. There are increasing numbers of consultants who provide tailored and targeted coaching in a wide variety of development areas. Coaching sessions can be either one-on-one or in groups, targeting specific fundraising opportunities and challenges. Topics may include such issues as campaign readiness, staff recruitment, development planning, marketing, board development, annual fund strategies and strategic planning.

What Can Coaches Do?

Coaches can help you to develop the skills, tools and support to succeed in several areas. Specifically, they can:

1. Teach you how to develop a realistic fundraising plan. Since so many development directors run into issues of unrealistic expectations about performance, an outside coach can help an organization put together a plan with goals that are driven by data and history; clear performance metrics for all members of the development team, including the board and

executive director; proven techniques and strategies; and timelines. In addition, the coach can serve as an advocate for the plan and can work to achieve buy-in from key players in a way that the development director cannot.

2. Serve as advocates and add credibility. Because coaches are experts, they can serve as the tough guy, bringing forth issues that may be unsafe for staff to broach. They can speak from their wide variety of experience and be trusted in ways that insiders are not.

3. Provide technical expertise. Coaches can focus on specific areas of development such as capital campaigns, major gifts, or foundation relations, as well as provide counsel on the full range of development activities. You may need technical support because your organization is changing its funding stream and trying new ways to raise money, or you may not have experienced a particular kind of development activity in your previous position and may need help in that area in order to advance your development program.

4. Provide professional contacts and linkages. In addition to your coach, you should access resources in the community that can help you do your job better. Your coach can connect you to experts, both informal and formal.

5. Train staff and board members. Coaches bring credibility, expertise and best practices.

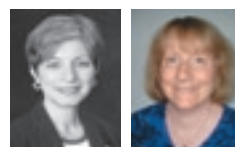
The Coaching Relationship

Selecting the right coach is important, whether you use an AFP mentor, a volunteer or a paid professional. Some of the questions you should ask include:

- What do I need my coach to do?
- How much time will I need with my coach?
- Does my coach have the expertise that I need?
- How and where will I meet with my coach?
- Can I work effectively with this coach?
- Do I have a budget to hire a paid coach?

Together, you need to create a plan of work, define the focus for the coaching relationship and determine the responsibilities of both parties.

Being a development professional can be exciting and rewarding, but it is also a demanding role. Having the skills necessary to perform the job is only one element of your ability to succeed. You also need to be able to navigate the political landscape, develop effective working relationships with key players and bring the required technical and strategic knowledge to your work. To be able to balance the many demands and responsibilities, you need support. Take advantage of educational and networking opportunities, keep your skills current and use the help of an outside coach to keep you on target. 🎯



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