

## Why Is It So Hard to Find Good Development Help?

Shari, a nonprofit executive director (ED), asked members of the Bridgespan Nonprofit ED/CEO LinkedIn Group, “Why is it so hard to find good development staff?” Her question inspired a lengthy discussion around the challenges nonprofits face in finding good development staff and some potential strategies for overcoming these hurdles.

Below, we’ve shared highlights from the nearly month-long conversation.

### Passion First, Experience Second

*A sincere passion for the organization’s work trumps experience in the minds of some EDs. Development skills can be learned, but a heartfelt commitment to the mission can’t.*

#### Carolyn, CEO

I have a different philosophy than most, but I hire all my staff based on their passion and commitment for our mission. Our development director has been with us for seven years. She came with very little development knowledge but a huge heart for what we do. I’ve invested in her by paying for seminars, webinars, and classes for her to learn development tools. What she could not learn was a passion for what we do and that is essential.

#### Torrie, CEO

I have been with my organization for 10 years and in nonprofits for 26 years but always in program director roles, with no experience in development except for business development and the typical helping out at events. One year ago I was promoted to CEO (context: my organization has a \$2-million budget and about 25 staff) and a development director had left a few months prior, so we needed to hire. I interviewed several very qualified development professionals who were looking to leave hospitals and other nonprofits. The fit just didn’t feel right to me, so I hired someone who had been a contracted event planner for us. [It was] not a traditional development choice, but all the passion, traits, and qualities you want in a development director were there. She is bold, vivacious, passionate about our mission, more motivated to raise money than anyone I have ever met, and she has a solid entrepreneurial streak. She also has a master’s in Nonprofit Management and has become a valuable asset to the leadership team. So, speaking to the title of this discussion “Why is it so hard to find good development staff” I guess my advice is that sometimes the nontraditional choice can really work.

### It Takes a Team—including the ED

*While organizations might need a director of development to oversee fundraising, the job doesn’t fall solely on one person in many organizations. For these nonprofits, development is a team sport that includes board members, the ED, the leadership team, and program staff.*

#### Boston

535 Boylston St., 10th Floor  
Boston, MA 02116  
T. 617.572.2833  
F. 617.572.2834

#### New York

112 West 34th St., Suite 1510  
New York, NY 10120  
T. 646.562.8900  
F. 646.562.8901

#### San Francisco

465 California St., 11th Floor  
San Francisco, CA 94104  
T. 415.627.1100  
F. 415.627.4575

**Deidre, ED**

The development director role is often an unrealistic one without good support. Boards and EDs don't understand that it's truly a team effort to raise the organization's budget and that a true culture of philanthropy and clear expectations for all are needed in order to have a development director be effective. I recommend reading the article below, which shows research that has been done about this [topic and some suggestions](#).

**Marchelle, ED**

I am starting to personally question the ability of development directors to be successful in smaller, nontraditional organizations to just raise money and build relationships, and not be as personally involved in the mission of the organization as everyone else. There is something very divisive about that. Some of the best fundraisers I know are program people working in the trenches, talking out loud about what they do while they are doing it, connecting with the people (clients, donors, etc.) and being human with them. People give with their heart and are moved by action and compassion and engagement and seeing change with their own eyes. Why not give your program people fundraising goals and bring on more of them?

**Karen, President and CEO**

While it takes some time and commitment, I have had success growing my own development staff internally. I currently run a \$3.3-million nonprofit that raises about \$1 million/year in a very staff-driven program. My current director of development is 27 years old and started with us as a college intern. From the beginning, everyone could see her talent and potential in fund development: She is hard working, sees the big picture but has no problem handling the details, can remember people, makes connections, and gets along with everybody. But she came to us fresh out of college not knowing the difference between the annual fund and a planned gift. I believe any reasonably quick person can pick up the mechanics. It is the culture in which development people work that really seems to matter. To ensure we have the optimum culture, we have made the saying, "Everyone is a development officer" our organization's mantra. We meet weekly with our 'development team' that consists of many people in the organization besides the director and her development associate. And when a program person, social media intern, or member of the janitorial staff thinks of a fundraising idea or makes an important connection, we celebrate it so everyone knows and is hopefully inspired to look for opportunities.

Last, I recognize that as the CEO, I am actually the top development staff member in the house, so I make sure that my specific tasks in that area always get checked off the list before anything else. Nothing makes a director of development feel better than having confidence that the CEO has her/his back and is working as hard on development as s/he is.

As for the shortage of directors of development, I don't believe that is imagined. The good ones go to bigger organizations or become CEOs themselves. When I consult or just confer with other nonprofit staff and boards, I always tell them that a good director of development does not mean they no longer have to think about fundraising; it means they will now be thinking about it all the time. They are often surprised because they think a good director of development takes on all of that 'unpleasantness,' keeping them from having to do it. And that is the environment in which many directors of development find themselves, and I believe they keep switching jobs hoping to find a place where they are not handed the entire responsibility for fundraising alone and then held to public account for it—the very definition of a stressful situation. And the job switching keeps them from developing the long-term relationships that build donor confidence

and subsequently, our sector. The right culture can help attract and retain the right director of development. It just takes lots of time and commitment to create the culture.

### **Robert, Nonprofit Strategist**

The truth is there is often an innate conflict between an ED and development director. The organization's survival is often dependent on fundraising, yet the director often doesn't have the tools needed to do the job, or the organization's infrastructure isn't in a place to allow for the director to be successful. In these times, raising money of any kind for most nonprofits is very hard. Unless you have a great board, an ED that is out there every day meeting with people and passing them on to the development office, it is going to be a bumpy road. I don't know just how much a CFRE [certified fund raising executive] certificate means in the real world; most of the best fundraisers have learned on the job by being tossed into the fire, sort of like computer programmers. To raise money you need support, you need access, you need time. If those three things are not in place, the relationship will not work. In today's world the expectations are often not realistic, and starting off with the expectation that the development director walks in with a binder filled with donors to call is almost never the case.

### **Christine, ED**

I became an ED about two years ago during a growth period. There were several positions that needed to be created/hired and one of them could have been a director of development. I chose not to create a separate position for development because I am the best person to lead fundraising efforts. I have the big-picture vision and know the program details intimately. Our growth is inextricably linked to funding in a puzzle of constantly moving parts. I know this puzzle better than anyone. I am the person funders want to meet with and talk to. Instead of hiring a director of development, I hire all of my staff with consideration of the value they add to fundraising efforts.

I am working to build an organizational culture that views donors and funders as part of one big ecosystem: staff, program participants, board, public, and funders. I am finding that donors increasingly want to be part of this ecosystem, not just write a check. Our whole organization, including the teen moms we work with, is involved in fundraising. One of our program managers came from a foundation and likes this type of work. She helps with grant writing and setting up meetings. All staff [members] are required to identify donor prospects and, where appropriate, make introductions. Other staff keeps close tabs on outcomes data and regularly provides it to me tailored for fundraising efforts. Every board member was brought on with the clear expectation of fundraising. The teen moms welcome donors who visit their meetings, come to our events, and will be doing a night of "thank you" calls in June.

I admit I am in the luxurious position of heading up a relatively new organization with plenty of room to build organizational culture. But I have been on both sides, ED and director of development (different title), and I just think the vast majority of directors of development are set up for failure. If you do have a director of development, please don't set expectations that you would not want to be held accountable for yourself. That is the fastest way to burnout.

### **Hire Interim Executives**

*Sometimes, according to the community members below, hiring someone in an interim development role can provide expertise and perspective on what your organization really needs.*

**Jim, Nonprofit Consultant**

An alternative approach could be using a seasoned fundraising executive consultant to assess and make recommendations regarding your specific higher-level needs, such as development of strategies for institutional and major gifts as well as the growth of your annual fund. In addition, a consultant can assess the current skill level, involvement, and performance of the board, yourself, and the development associate, and offer recommendations that delineate roles and enhance overall organizational performance. A potential outcome could be using a consultant on an annual basis and revising the priority responsibilities of the development associate, ED, and board to meet your agency's needs.

Since fundraising revenue is a significant portion of your budget, I recommend that you try adding a fundraising executive to your board. I also highly recommend (if you're not already a member) joining the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP).

**Jerold, Interim Executive**

Before you hire another development director, I recommend you contract [with] an interim director of development with the expertise, experience, and knowledge to help you identify the critical development needs. The interim can continue the fundraising, but with his/her experience can help you and the board determine what the organization really needs by doing a gap analysis, a strategic development plan for your organization, and assist you in developing a job description that really fits your organizational needs. I have served in an interim capacity a number of times and found that the job description, salary level, and hiring process changed, for the better, after my interim assignment.