



117 N. First Street, Suite 70
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104
www.RichnerRichner.com

The Development Staff Role

The goal of sound fund development is to nurture relationships with individuals and corporate and foundation representatives in a way that will lead to increasing financial investment in the non-profit organization over the long term. Accordingly, it is vitally important for key staff members to build the confidence and skills necessary to comfortably carry out this role for the organizations they serve.

In non-profit organizations with a paid CEO, the entire organization – board members, staff, and donors alike – takes its cues regarding the relative importance of fundraising from the attitude and actions of the CEO. In a positive environment, the development staff can supplement the relationship building skills of the CEO, develop their own relationships with prospective donors, and deploy non-development staff and volunteers to assist with the donor cultivation and solicitation process where possible.

Over \$300 billion is given annually in the United States to non-profit organizations, mostly from individuals. A disproportionate share of this amount comes from a relatively small number of donors. This mirrors the uneven distribution of wealth in our society. Thus, wise organizations with the resources to do so, do everything in their power to elevate the role of development staff whenever possible, and focus their work on major donors as much as possible.

When the prospective major donor pool tops 100 individuals, corporations, and foundations collectively, an organization is typically warranted in investing in a major gift officer. Whether development staff devote their entire time to major gift work or only a fraction of it, the goal should be to develop a culture whereby they can create peer-like relationships with prospective donors independent of the CEO. This dynamic is strategically important in order to fully leverage and expand the staff assets of the organization.

Smart CEOs actively assist their development staff in developing these peer-like relationships. They recognize that the more they can do to

share their relationships, introduce their development staff to influential people, and include them in planned meetings, the more opportunities development staff will have to form their own, independent relationships, thus freeing the CEO to attend to other matters.

These are examples of ways in which smart CEOs use development staff:

- Inform prospective donors that their development staff person will be present in individual meetings with them, and include staff in the creation of the strategy for the meeting beforehand.
- Give development staff a meaningful role in all individual meetings with prospective major donors.
- Tell major donors in individual meetings that follow up and next steps will be largely handled by development staff, thus increasing the development staff's stature in the eyes of prospective donors and allowing the staff to operate independently of the CEO.
- Include development staff when small or large events will occur. This means strategizing with staff before the event, introducing them to guests at the event, giving them appropriate seating or positioning at the event, and debriefing with them after the event so that agreed upon next steps can be carried out in a timely fashion.
- Trust development staff to create relationships with prospective donors without the CEO present.

When prospective major donors understand that the development staff role is important and valued in the eyes of the CEO, they will begin to trust and respect development staff to be their designated conduit for accessing the organization and its resources and staff. High net worth individuals, whether they are individual donors or represent a grant making entity, understand that busy non-profit CEOs cannot (and should not) attend to every aspect of the relationship they have with the organization. They are used to dealing with staff and respect their role.