

EXECUTIVE RECRUITMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

Why are Good Fundraisers Hard to Find?

The best fundraisers possess two key characteristics – the problem is, they are not often found in the same person.

By Laurel Kimball, Ph.D.

Why is it hard to find great fundraisers? At least some blame can be placed on basic economics: demand for exceptional fundraisers outpaces supply. But this begs the question: why aren't there more exceptional fundraisers in the first place?

I think the answer is simple: it is hard to find a great fundraiser because fundraising requires an unusual combination of “opposite” skills. The best development professionals are both personable and very organized and analytical – and those two characteristics are not often found in the same person.

One very successful fundraiser I know has this unusual dual skill set. When I describe this person (who happens to be Phoenix Philanthropy's President, Richard Tollefson) to others, I say two of his characteristics stand out: his distinctive laugh and his unusual love of matrices, tables, and charts. His genuine laugh and outgoing personality allow him to get along with almost anyone. His analytical love of matrices, tables and charts – well, that's what keeps him amazingly organized.

Of course, fundraisers need people skills to build strong relationships with donors. But why is the stereotype of a “great” development officer usually a backslapping, raucous person who is the life of the party? Experience actually shows the most effective fundraisers are those with a broad range of interests who add substance and thoughtful comments to any conversation – and who are able to develop and present an articulate case for support.

The second skill-set – being organized, analytical, disciplined, strategic – is not always included in the fundraiser's job description. But it needs to be. The best development professionals are more than great “closers.” They possess the analytical mindset to use data systems, to advance donor relationships from start to finish, and to proactively devote time to managing their development team. Perhaps most importantly, the best fundraisers have the vision to “see” the big strategic picture, from annual giving to capital campaigns.

The next time you are hiring a development professional or defining the skill set of your future fundraisers, look for both halves of the equation, personable and analytical. And once you have found that gem, do all you can to keep that person for the long-term success of your organization.

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