

A Development Director Needs More Than “A Smile and A Shoeshine,” But It’s A Good Start

April 2005

By Tony Poderis



This is the era of high-tech delivery of information in an instant. The Internet is accessible from any telephone line, and lap-top computers let us take the facts and figures – all the facts and figures – to wherever they’re needed. Development professionals must master this technology which lets us massage estate planning scenarios, target solicitation mailings, and develop campaign giving plans. But, we must also remember that, no matter how high-tech the tools, funds are raised person-to-person.

In Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman,” Willy Loman’s rejection of new technology, when he encounters a voice recorder for the first time, is part of his slow and agonizing deterioration. The only thing he knows – selling – is slipping from his grasp, and he tries to tighten his grip on it by clinging to the past. The times are changing and Willy isn’t. But that doesn’t mean that the experience of a lifetime of selling is no longer valid when he declares, “The man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want.” Willy is talking about being a salesman and having the proper temperament for the job, but he might just as well have been talking about Development Directors.

Those of us who carry the responsibility of seeing to it that money is raised for non-profit organizations would do well to bear in mind Willy Loman’s failure to change with the times. But we should also remember what he says about the process of selling. You won’t be good at selling widgets, or orchestras, or social services unless you have the temperament and the attitude for the job.

Somebody’s Got To Do The Job

While not all non-profit organizations have professional fund-raising officers on staff, any organization that counts on contributed income to provide a substantial portion of its budget should have a professional development director. In small organizations, the development director could conceivably be a volunteer. However, the important thing is that within even the smallest of non-profits, someone is given as his or her primary organization responsibility the coordination and implementation of contributed income programs. A development director’s principal charge is to create numerous, efficient, and compelling opportunities for donors to support an organization and to make the experience of giving satisfying and rewarding.

The Many “Hats” Do Not Always Fit

It is not a good idea for an organization’s executive director to also fill the role of development director. If the organization has a valid mission, the executive director has a full-time role to play in coordinating and carrying out that mission. Fund-raising needs to be someone’s primary concern. To illustrate that point, look at the following breakdown of the time spent by a generic development director on various important activities:

1. Plan fund-raising campaigns and activities 25%
 2. Manage fund-raising campaigns and activities 25%
 3. Recruit and train volunteer fund-raising leadership 15%
 4. Identify and cultivate prospective donors 10%
 5. Stay on top of advancements and changes that are pertinent to raising money within the community, to the organization’s mission and programs, and to the development profession 10%
 6. Forecast and evaluate the potential of fund-raising campaigns and activities 5%
 7. Produce solicitation materials and train volunteer solicitors for fund-raising campaigns 5%
 8. Manage personnel within the development department and interact with other organization staff members 5%
- 100%

Does this look like a job that can be done well as an adjunct to another? Even more telling is the mix of qualities that make for a successful development director.

No Matter How Great The Talent, You Need The Temperament To Succeed

Two of the best development professionals I know are Joyce Braun and Ellen Feuer. They worked with me for several years at the Cleveland Orchestra and now run their own development departments at major institutions. Over the years, many people came to us looking for work in development and asking for job-hunting advice. After an interview we would often discuss our visitor’s temperament and interpersonal skills “qualities” as a potential development professional. Eventually we made a game out of appraising the development potential of people we came across in situations where we could observe them in action. The best opportunities to play this game turned out to be at meetings that either were held in restaurants or were catered. Depending on the attitudes our often harried and hurried servers would display and the responses they would make to our demands and complaints, we would give a thumbs up or down as to whether we would hire them for a junior position in the Orchestra’s development department.

Would you hire someone for development work like the server who replied when told that a steak he or she served was cold, “But it can’t be,” or “I don’t know what’s wrong with the chef back there”? Wouldn’t you rather hire someone with the sensitivity to respond, “I’m very sorry. Please let me take it back and bring you your steak the way you want it”? Determining whether a person’s temperament is suited to development work is almost that simple. I hire and recommend entry-level development people largely based on their temperament and affability. How well

they deal with criticism, are likely to handle volunteers and donors who are disappointed or upset, and show gratitude, are key indicators.

Development professionals must have a temperament suited to serving people's needs. They have to be attentive, persistent, and flexible. They need to have a thick skin, and be willing to hide their light under a bushel. In fund-raising, the glory goes to the getters, not the facilitators. Part of the development director's job is to make the volunteers look good, even at his or her own expense.

Development professionals need to exhibit a demeanor that is a little self-effacing. While the trustees, donors, and volunteers with whom we deal may regard us as accomplished professionals, they nevertheless appreciate a touch of deference when we are seeking their help and money. It's not that they want us to be subservient, but there is an almost imperceptible level just slightly below that of peer where they are most comfortable placing us. Many, many times I have addressed benefactors younger than I as Mr., Mrs., Ms., or Miss. Often I have had relationships of some years' duration without it ever being suggested that I call them by their first names.

Forego The Ego – Remember It's About The Organization

Knowing your place as a development officer is a practice which I believe made me more effective during my 20 years at the Cleveland Orchestra. Let me illustrate. Whenever I chanced upon important female contributors in the lobby prior to concerts and during intermissions, I would extend my hand and lock my arm to receive their handshake, avoiding the obligatory kiss on the cheek they reserved for friends and social acquaintances. I did not want major donors to see me as one of them on a social level. What I wanted was to be one of them in the context of support for the Orchestra we all loved. At all times, I worked to keep my relationships with donors on a professional, not a social, level. As a result, my donor acquaintances felt comfortable calling me with requests for assistance and special treatment. Had they seen me as someone they needed to treat as a social equal, it is unlikely I would have been asked for help in that way. My willingness to provide deferential assistance, in the name of The Cleveland Orchestra, indebted them to it and disposed them toward making even larger gifts.

Don't Steal The Scenes – Lead From Behind Them

A development director must be capable of functioning in a support role and deriving professional satisfaction from working in the background. As development director of The Cleveland Orchestra, I was not its artistic director, nor was I a musician. The work I did behind the scenes made it possible for others to make the music and be in the spotlight. I found that personally and professionally satisfying. No matter the organization, development professionals make an indirect, not a direct, contribution to its accomplishments. When they do their jobs well, they function in the background without calling attention to themselves. Just as public acclaim for fund-raising achievement is reserved for the volunteers, the glory of an organization's accomplishments belongs to those who have direct responsibility for fulfilling its mission.

The skills of a good development director are much the same as those of a good sales manager. It is the job of an organization's development director to inspire his or her salespersons – the volunteer solicitors – and arm them with all the tools they need to be successful. At the same time development directors must be able to run a tight ship and bring a sense of control, perspective, and order to the process of raising money.

Good development directors are donor-driven, rather than institution-driven. They function as the donors' voice within the organization, bringing donor cares and concerns to staff and trustees. Yet they must remain conscious and protective of the integrity and purpose of the organization. They are in the best position to say no to a request which asks too much of the organization and undermines its mission.

We Need To Develop More Development Directors

The number of cultural, health, religious, social service, and educational organizations that must conduct fund-raising campaigns has increased dramatically in the past decade. Well-trained and experienced development officers are in high demand. A perusal of the Sunday want ads in any big-city newspaper turns up a surprising number of positions for experienced development directors, and national non-profit trade journals such as the "Chronicle of Philanthropy" are packed with such advertisements. Yet good development officers are hard to find. One reason for this may be that there is no proven training ground for development officers other than the process of apprenticeship in such mid-level and junior positions as associate and assistant director; director of annual, endowment, or capital giving; and development associate (which is often largely an administrative-assistant job.) However, except for colleges and universities, only a relative handful of really large non-profit organizations budget for more than a single professional development position, with the result that only a shallow pool of development professionals have had the opportunity to grow incrementally in experience and responsibility.

It is unfortunate that more organizations do not see the parallels between the role of development director in the non-profit community and that of sales manager in the business world. Corporate downsizing has put on the streets many mature, capable persons experienced in sales and customer-service management who could function well as development personnel. Both sales managers and development directors need superior organizational and communication skills, a service orientation, analytic capabilities, and conceptual skills. What the former sales manager lacks in knowledge of fund-raising-specific management can be learned from seminars and publications.

Fund-Raising Is Selling Not Promoting

Instead, organizations often turn to persons with public relations or promotion experience within a non-profit setting and try to convert them into development professionals. Almost invariably, this approach is a mistake. PR persons are usually idea generators who are great at creating a favorable climate for an organization. Where they fall down is in the day-to-day care and feeding of a campaign: the sloggy process of building a network of volunteers, training them, and so on. The temperament and expectations of PR professionals and development professionals are different enough that it is almost impossible someone could star in both disciplines.

If I were hiring a person to run a development operation and had to pick someone with no previous professional fund-raising experience, I would look for someone such as the head of a department within a retail operation like a department store. This person would have managed a sales staff, worked at making products available to customers, handled customer concerns and complaints, conducted special sales programs, and attended to the minutiae of day-to-day operations. Exactly what a development director does!

Tony Poderis was for 20 years to 1993 Director of Development for The Cleveland Orchestra and its Summer Home, Blossom Music Center. He was responsible for Cleveland's largest annual institutional fund-raising campaign. Since 1993, Tony has been a fund-raising consultant serving all non-profit institutions' needs to develop and to maximize their potential to raise Annual, Endowment, Capital, and Sponsorship & Underwriting funds.