When the Development Officer Is Obliged to Raise Her or His Own Salary

Paying For Your Own Keep

Too often, especially in smaller non-profit organizations, staff development officers are forced into a deplorable position that belittles them and damages the organization. They are charged with personally raising their own salaries. These salaries sit outside the normal budgeting process. They are not treated as a regular operating expense. Instead, they become an extraordinary item, an afterthought.

There is no rational argument for this practice. I believe it comes from trustees who mistakenly view fund-raising as a necessary, but demeaning, evil. They try at all costs to avoid doing it themselves, even though fund-raising is universally acknowledged to be a primary responsibility of trustees. For these malfunctioning trustees, fund-raising is a repugnant task they hire someone else to do.

An attitude such as this places fund-raising outside of an organization's regular operational activities. From there it is a short step to not including it in the budget and making development staff responsible for finding the money for their salaries.

Such a view is dangerously flawed. Trustees who think that the people they hire to raise funds are in fact "the" fund-raisers condemn their organization to a life of under funding and curtailed programming. It is the responsibility of the leadership of an organization to take the lead in raising the funds needed to sustain that organization. There is no stronger indicator of an organization in trouble than the refusal of its trustees to accept their fund-raising responsibility.

Fund-Raising Expense: The Cost Of Doing the Organization's "Business"

Growing, successful organizations see development staff salaries in the same light as any other personnel expense. They understand that a strong development effort is central to carrying out the mission of the organization. They know that fund-raising must be part of the operating budget. For them, fund-raising expenses and salaries are line items to be anticipated, projected, and budgeted—just like rent, utilities, supplies, and programming salaries.

The challenge for development officers faced with a raise-your-own-salary edict is to enlighten the organization's leadership. For the good of the organization, such leadership has to be brought to an understanding that there are right ways and wrong ways to take on the daunting challenge of fund-raising.

The primary operational concern of a development officer must be the creation and management of a structure for raising the money to fund day-to-day operations. After that come capital and endowment campaigns. That order cannot be maintained when you are expected to mount a separate effort to raise your salary.

I'm not saying that development officers placed in such a position will selfishly respond with the attitude, "I have to get mine first." But, competent development professionals who find themselves in such an organization will realize that fund-raising needs can't be met unless someone is in place to manage the effort. That automatically puts getting the money to pay their salaries at the head of the line.

Squandering The Resources

What comes first for staff development professionals in this no-win position? Do they raise their salaries first and then get on with meeting the organization's main fund-raising needs? Or should they be required to first raise the money the organization needs to balance its books for the fiscal year, and then go look for the money to pay their next year's salaries? It's a no-win situation either way.

Development officers forced to raise their own salaries first will go to the organization's surest prospects for those salaries, taking them off the board for other solicitations. Those who have to do it at the end of the year are likely to squirrel away a few sure thing donors.

No matter which timetable such a development effort follows, the development staff will be distracted and some of the organization's best donor prospects are likely to be under solicited. Asking these donors of first resort to give to the Development-Officer's-Salary Campaign is likely to let them off the hook for other potentially larger gifts. It also runs the risk of pushing these important donors away from developing a sense of involvement with the organization's core mission and purpose.

A Matter Of Survival

Then there is the whole issue of distracting the development staff from the organization's needs. When they are worried about their paychecks, will the development staff be able to concentrate on long-term goals or building a cadre of volunteer solicitors? Such a development staff will be forced to deal on a daily basis with concerns over the financial security of their families. If some measure of success is achieved, how will the random receiving of contributions to the salary fit with the exacting schedule of the development officers' regular and required needs—such as to pay the monthly mortgage?

What if they are unsuccessful in raising their salary money? Will they get paid? From where will the shortfall come? It's human nature to expect that if you can't raise your own salary, and you cannot meet your personal financial obligations, and can't pay your bills, it would be very likely that you will blame the board of trustees because they did not help you, and that they had you working under such a hardship in the first place. To add insult to injury, you can bet that should you not raise your own salary, the leadership will likely penalize you anyway for not meeting your "quota."

Will the best development professionals choose to work in an environment of such insecurity? I think not. Organizations that force development professionals into insecure positions will find their development operations staffed by the less experienced and less capable. And they will lose quickly those who gain experience and develop greater competency.

And what happens when they leave? Remember, such an organization's relationships with its donors are in the hands of its staff, not its leadership. Will those donors transfer their relationships to the new staff member, or will they move on with the departing staff member? If I were the executive director or trustee of a non-profit organization, that is not a question I would like to find myself facing.

Fund-Raising Is A Shared Responsibility
For Everyone In The Organization

I am tempted here to go into all the reasons why solicitations should not be made by development staff, but by peers of prospects. But that would only distract us from the narrower issue of raising your own salary. (Besides, I've got the topic of who the true fundraisers in your organization should be covered by the article listed and linked below.) Suffice it to say that all the arguments against asking staff to be solicitors hold even more strongly when it comes to forcing them to solicit their salaries. No competent professional should be forced to beg for her or his pay, and no prospective donor should be approached by someone asking for money that will go into her or his pocket. As a matter of fact, in the latter instance, it's common knowledge that most funding sources will not give money in support of a named individual—you. Work to convince your leadership that you will have no success whatever when asking foundation officers and corporate contributions managers for money to pay your salary.

No one ever said that fund-raising was easy. It takes belief in the cause and persistent hard work to be successful. That belief and hard work must begin with an organization's volunteer leadership. Trustees who do not understand the need to develop a fully professional development operation doom their organization's fund-raising efforts. Key to developing such an operation is the realization that fund-raising is an integrated part of the organization. Asking development staff to raise their own salaries outside of the organization's regular budgeting process, places development efforts outside of the organization's core.

Development officers who agree to work in an environment where they raise salaries in a separate campaign do a disservice to the organization. They allow malfunctioning trustees to continue to shirk their responsibilities. Compensation for development staff must be part of an organization's regular annual budget. The organization that does otherwise hamstrings its operations today and its sustainability in the future.

So what if you, after all, are successful, and do raise your own salary? You can be sure that the board will not pitch in to help raise the "other" money needed to operate the organization. After all, when you raise your own salary and they see that you are a proven, effective and successful "fund-raiser," they'll no doubt believe that you can personally raise much more of what the organization needs without them.

Additional Reading:

[Who Should Raise The Money From Within Your Organization?]