

Follow the Leader

It is the night of the kick-off event for a major capital campaign. A major donor arrives a little bit early to discuss his gift. Everywhere people are scrambling to put up last minute decorations. He approaches a weary campaign volunteer.

“Excuse me, I’d like to speak with your campaign chairman right away, do you know where I can find him?”

The puzzled volunteer scrutinizes the donor.

“Aren’t you the chairman?”

From an outside perspective, a quick look at a fundraising effort can create an immediate impression of organization or chaos. One of two questions will arise in the observer’s mind: “Who’s the genius who put this whole thing together?” or “Who’s in charge of this mess anyway?”

Without going into any depth, the outsider has identified the true source of success or disaster in the organization – the one person or people “in charge.” For insiders, busy with their personal workloads and overloaded on information, this central issue can be obscured: the key to successful fundraising is in good leadership.

Take an outsider’s perspective of your organization and compare it to these hypotheticals:

- 1 Hunky-Dory Hospital is entering a capital campaign. The chairman of the board and the executive director have sat down and defined the roles of the board and the staff in the campaign. They have assessed the needs of Hunky-Dory and have communicated these needs to the board. The board has selected a dedicated campaign chairman and appointed an enthusiastic steering committee. 10-4 Counsel Inc. has been brought in to help the staff develop a campaign plan and train steering committee volunteers in soliciting. The chairman and executive director have taken people’s ideas into consideration and lent their personal enthusiasm and direction to the campaign. Motivated and informed, everyone is feeling a-okay and gets down to business.
- 2 Pequod Oceanographic Institute has a new chairman of the board. “The Captain,” as he is called, has insisted on a restructuring of the board and wants Pequod to assume a more aggressive stance in the world of oceanographic research. The new board supports his mission and wants to begin with a capital campaign with major funding from lantern oil and food processing corporations. They have attempted to realign the institute’s faculty and have pushed through a change in staff hiring policies. Meanwhile, the executive director of Pequod has intensively cultivated alumni and other prospects in line with his ambitions for the institute. The Captain and the executive director are busy undermining

- each other's responsibilities; they have had bitter disputes and the Pequod community feels angry and alienated. Ourway Consultants, Inc. has terminated their contract with the institute because their plan for development was rejected. It looks as if Pequod won't be getting any fish to fry.
- 3 Humpty Dumpty School wants to enter a campaign of some kind. The chairman of the board and the headmaster haven't quite decided whether it should be a building or endowment campaign, but they're going to talk it over. The headmaster thinks the size of the campaign should be determined, but the chairman says everyone should "just get it together." People seem to be duplicating each other's work, doing research that isn't used and waiting for the next step. At one point a steering committee chairman was appointed and found many enthusiastic volunteers; however many aren't sure what their role is and don't know what their message to prospects should be. All the King's Horses Consulting Co. has been hired by the school, but they don't seem to have many solutions. Everyone feels Humpty just needs a little push in the right direction...

Every non-profit should examine its organization to recognize where its leadership is strong or lacking and whether that leadership is productive, counter-productive, or unproductive. Good leadership entails an ability to define roles, assign tasks, incorporate the work of others and motivate people without dominating them. Poor leadership guarantees that even the most committed staff and enthusiastic volunteers will underachieve. Ideally, of course, the chairman of the board and the executive director will both be good leaders who work in harmony with clearly defined roles.

A good chairman of the board first of all demands commitment of board members and then, with the board, shapes the mission of an organization and sets its fundraising goals. The chairman must ensure that all board members have thorough knowledge of the organization, that they will attend meetings and that they will follow through on the tasks they are given. In turn, the chairman must delegate responsibility and take suggestions from board members. A chairman who is too weak or too forceful will confuse or alienate the rest of the board.

The chairman is also responsible for seeing that the board relates well to the organization's constituency, especially the organization's staff and core volunteers. The board must govern the organization properly, overseeing and examining operations without interfering or undermining the authority of the executive director or director of development. The board must also dedicate itself to conveying goals and responsibilities to volunteers who will help in the fundraising effort. At the same time, the board cannot afford to distance itself too far from the staff and volunteers or it may soon find its efforts are being misdirected.

The executive director has a more difficult leadership role as manager and figurehead. To keep the organization healthy and on track, he or she must employ strong managerial skills and have the personal presence to inspire

confidence in the staff, board, and, of course, potential donors. It is the executive director who must be willing to make tough and timely decisions and explain those decisions to the organization's constituency. An executive director who lacks these qualities will have a very hard time maintaining authority and support.

An organization that lacks a strong leader in one of these two key positions can at least hope for a balance from the other side, but an organization that lacks leadership in both positions will quickly have to find leaders among its constituency and staff and give these people responsibility if it is looking for any kind of success in its fundraising efforts.

When, for example, the chairman of the board is a weak solicitor and does not relate easily to volunteers and potential prospects, the board should appoint a strong campaign steering committee chairman who will clearly and directly convey the needs of the organization to its supporters and who will not hesitate to make donation requests. This person should also be able to motivate other steering committee members who will share the responsibility of attracting donors.

Another example is the executive director who lacks an inspiring personal presence and who does not communicate effectively with potential donors. In this case, the organization requires a director of development who will communicate the organization's needs. If the executive director is a strong figurehead but a weak manager, then the director of development must be someone who is capable of taking almost full responsibility for managing the fundraising effort.

Often, lack of experience and organization are the biggest obstacles to good leadership. In these cases, consultants offer good remedies. Through guidance and training workshops they can bolster the leadership capabilities of important personnel and volunteers. Most importantly, they provide an outside, objective opinion to identify leadership problems and suggest necessary changes.

Obviously, every organization has its complicating factors, but the key is to identify the big problems and adapt creative solutions. So, the next time people get a glimpse of your fundraising effort, make sure they walk away impressed by your organization.