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Development Directors Are Not Miracle Workers

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By [Rick Moyers](#)

Several weeks ago I had lunch with a board member of a small community-based nonprofit that does important work in the D.C. region. The board member also happens to be a seasoned consultant who has written several books on fundraising.

That's why I was surprised when he advanced an argument I've heard many times from board members of other organizations. It goes like this:

“Our executive director is terrific but doesn't have a background in fundraising or time to focus on it. Our board members want to help, but they don't have friends with deep pockets and are not fundraising experts. What we really need is a topnotch fundraising professional on staff. But we can't raise enough money to hire one, so we're stuck. We're never going to be really good at raising money until we can hire a development director.”

Some parts of this argument do ring true. *UnderDeveloped*, a new national study from CompassPoint and the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, provides plenty of evidence that small nonprofits have a hard time finding and keeping skilled development directors, in part because they don't have the money to pay competitive salaries.

But the report also illustrates why I take issue with the suggestion that, for many small organizations, hiring a development director is a magic bullet for solving fundraising woes.

Even among organizations fortunate enough to have development directors, large numbers of boards and executives continue to be unhappy with fundraising results and to blame the development director when things go poorly. Nearly a third of the executive directors in the CompassPoint/Haas Jr. Fund survey were at least somewhat dissatisfied with their development director's performance, and a quarter said they had fired their previous development director.

At the same time, significant numbers of development directors—one in five in the CompassPoint study—describe their partnership with the executive director as weak or non-existent. And many complain that they don't have enough involvement in developing budgets and fundraising targets to ensure realistic performance goals.

With dissatisfaction so widespread, clearly the mere presence of a development director is not sufficient to guarantee successful fundraising. In some cases, it may even be a hindrance—leading boards and executives to the mistaken conclusion that fundraising is someone else's responsibility.

I don't mean to suggest that a great development director can't help an organization take its fundraising to new levels of success. Many do. But many others take the fall for disappointing

fundraising performance, or limp along for a year or two without the support or systems they need to be successful, and then depart for better pay or more functional organizations.

Hiring a development director will only be transformative under the right conditions, which include:

- A board and executive who view bringing on a development director as a strategy for expanding and enhancing their essential roles in fundraising, rather than a way to avoid or minimize their involvement.
- A clear job description for the development director, with realistic performance expectations on the part of the executive director and board.
- A high level of trust and engagement between the executive director and the development director.
- Input from the development director on budgets and fundraising goals.
- A willingness on the part of the organization to invest in systems and infrastructure, such as software and formal planning, to support fundraising.
- An understanding among all staff that fundraising and stewardship are part of everyone's job, not the responsibility of one person, and that fundraising is important programmatic work—not just a necessary evil.

Admittedly, not many nonprofits have all those elements in place. However, the list is useful as a reality check for boards and executives considering a development director hire.

My concern is that too many executives and boards, beleaguered by relentless pressure to raise money, have unrealistic expectations about what a development director can accomplish. For most executive directors—and especially for leaders of small organizations—fundraising is an integral and important part of their jobs. Hiring a development director won't make that go away.

And most organizations need the support and engagement of board members as donors, ambassadors, solicitors, and networkers. A good development director will create more opportunities for board engagement in fundraising, rather than lessening the board's involvement.

Assuming that the organization has a compelling mission and does good work, the real keys to effective fundraising are the leadership, vision, and skill of the executive director; an engaged, committed, and high-functioning board; and a strong working partnership between the board and the executive. If those things are in place, a development director can be successful.

And if those things are not in place, even the most talented development director will struggle.

Which suggests that perhaps organizations and their boards should focus less on fundraising as the function of a single staff member or department and more on the underlying conditions that allow organizations to be successful at fundraising.

The development director is only one factor in a complicated equation.