



Finding & Keeping a Development Rockstar

**A guide to ending employee
turnover within your
development office.**



It's all about relationships.

Introduction

Regardless of the field of prospective employees today, finding and keeping great people is more challenging than ever.

You may be hiring because your development program is just beginning or it is growing. However, chances are you are looking to backfill an existing position due to a staff member's departure. The development field has some of the highest turnover rates of any profession. The average tenure of a development professional is about 18-24 months. This statistic has remained static for more than 20 years. If you have been part of one nonprofit organization for several years, it is likely that you have seen at least a couple of changes in the development team.

Finding the right person from the beginning is essential, and it's also a process that is rarely done well. There are many opinions on what the ideal characteristics are for a good development officer. Unfortunately, most of them miss the mark and bring little value to the search and hiring process. We are offering another take on how to find and keep a development rock star and to help bring an end to the revolving door of the development office.

If you can hire people whose passion intersects with the job, they won't require any supervision at all. They will manage themselves better than anyone could ever manage them. Their fire comes from within, not from without. Their motivation is internal, not external.

–Stephen Covey



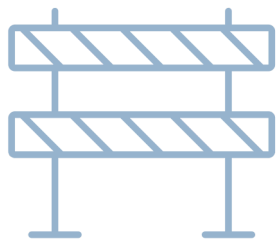
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Challenges with Churn

Losing a development officer can have serious implications for a nonprofit's mission. Building relationships takes time and trust. When donors are being introduced to a new development staff member every year or two, relationships begin to suffer. Key knowledge transfer is missed, and your development program loses momentum. In addition to the stress on leadership and the impact to staff morale, there is also a significant financial cost to hiring and onboarding new employees. On average, it takes at least a year for a new development director to get up to speed with your mission and begin to make a positive impact on fundraising. If he or she leaves six months later, you are right back where you started. You and your mission are like hamsters running on a wheel, not getting anywhere.

Why Do They Leave?

There are countless small factors that contribute to turnover, but these are the most common:



Unrealistic Expectations. Many nonprofits struggle with adding new development staff positions because of the initial investment required and the rise in overhead costs. Therefore, to win over the naysayers on the board, unrealistic expectations are often established for the new position. “We believe this new position should result in \$500,000 of growth in the first year!” This is highly unlikely. Regardless, there is pressure to hit that goal. From the beginning, your new staff member is being set up to fail and will likely lose credibility with the board.



Lack of Loyalty to Your Mission. If you hire a development staff member away from another organization where he or she is performing well, chances are you wooed the person over with better pay and benefits. These people are known as “job jumpers,” and their resume should tip you off. They will be with you for a short time until another job opens that will pay them slightly more.



Lack of Board Support. Sometimes board members believe that hiring development staff means they no longer have to raise money. Sometimes boards dig in on this issue and, inadvertently, place insurmountable barriers in front of the new development director. The board, in turn, is wondering why the new fundraiser is not performing.



Development Becomes a “Catch All.” This often happens in smaller nonprofits, especially if this is your organization’s first development hire. Once a position is given the green light to be added to the budget, there is a scurry to begin offloading duties from other staff members. Suddenly, your new development person is saddled with marketing, communications, event coordination, and administrative functions – leaving little time to build relationships with donors.



No Career Path. Development staff members are sometimes perceived to be the “necessary evil” in an organization that is focused on its noble mission. The development director is subordinated to an operations manager and partitioned off from the rest of the organization with nowhere to grow. There must also be consideration for what it might take to hire and retain the right development person. Development is just as important to a nonprofit organization as sales is to a for-profit company and should be compensated as such.

Treat employees like they make a difference and they will.

– Jim Goodnight

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Finding Your Rock Star

Having a quality development team is a significant factor in a thriving fundraising operation. And finding people who can do the job effectively requires more than sifting through resumes. Building a quality team requires nonprofit leaders to find the people who have the natural abilities to build relationships.

There is no such thing as the perfect person, but it is possible to find the right person to perfectly fill the role. The first challenge any nonprofit organization must overcome is understanding the characteristics required to effectively carry out the specific position you wish to fill.

In the development field, there is one predominant mistake: Seeking someone from the development world with development experience. Phrased a different way: Specific development experience is one of the least important qualifications of effective development staff. There are other key factors we urge you to look to before considering the “technical know-how” and details in a resume.

Development is all about relationships, so the traits you are looking for in a team member are not learned or academic – rather, they are innate. You are looking for that “X” factor. ***Consider the following characteristics as you seek to expand your team:***

Passion for your mission. One of the highest priorities should be to find someone who will represent your mission with passion and conviction. While your intent should always be to offer a competitive salary, you want to hire someone who is not only looking for money but also has a true desire to further your mission. You may find this person in your current volunteer or donor network, or even within your staff.

Good first impression. There is an air of confidence, professionalism, and trustworthiness. When someone has a pleasant demeanor and a kind appearance, we are far more comfortable and open to building a relationship. The first impression really does make a difference in how effectively someone is able to gain access to your donors.



Easy conversationalist. If someone is awkward or clumsy with casual conversation with you, then it is likely that a donor will have the same experience. Conversation is foundational to building a relationship.

High degree of emotional intelligence. They are self-aware and can handle interpersonal relationships with discernment and empathy. This is critical because your development officer must be capable of guiding and influencing the relationships he or she builds.

Assertive but not overbearing. You want a team member who is goal-oriented without being aggressive. To be clear, this does not mean they must have a natural comfort with asking for large amounts of money. It is normal to feel anxiety with challenging donors to move out of their comfort zones.

Teachable and adaptable. If the candidate has experience with other nonprofit missions or even within fundraising, you want them to be humble and willing to learn and adapt to your organization's culture. The art of relationship-based fundraising is something that can and should be taught within the context of your culture and mission.

Excellent communication skills. This is the one vital academic characteristic for a quality candidate. A development rock star must have excellent written and verbal communication skills. We suggest building a writing test into the interview process to ensure your prospective hire can write a good letter.

No company, small or large, can win over the long run without energized employees who believe in the mission and understand how to achieve it.

–Jack Welch



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Keeping Your Rock Star

Once you have found your development rock star, it's important to have a strategy to reward and retain this key staff member.



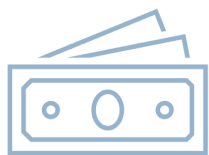
Set attainable metrics. Create a scorecard for each development staff member with 3 to 4 attainable metrics. Only one of these should be tied to a dollar amount. To create a sustainable fundraising program, we recommend focusing on donor retention, individual donor growth, and new donor acquisition.



Ensure support from senior leadership and the Board. For fundraising to thrive, your development team needs direct access to, support from, and collaboration with your organization's senior-most leader and the Board of Directors. The head of development should report directly to the Executive Director / CEO.



Define clear activities for the role. Administrative work such as event planning, direct mail, marketing, and database administration certainly have their place within your program; however, your development rock stars should be outward-facing and spending most of their time interacting with your top donors. If administrative work is becoming too burdensome, it may be time to add to the development staff.



Compensate fairly. In the for-profit world, it is not uncommon for a great salesperson to be one of the highest compensated employee in the company. An effective development director should be given the same consideration.



Invest in personal growth. In smaller organizations it may not be possible to create a formal career path for your development rock star; however, it helps greatly to give thought to how you will invest in their personal growth.

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Setting Expectations

Be patient with growth. Increasing your development operation in a healthy and quality manner is far better for your mission than the constant ups and downs associated with quick fixes. There is no shortcut and no risk-free path to get there.

A new fundraising position will likely not produce a net gain to your budget in the first year. At best, the position might pay for itself in the first 12-month cycle. Hire with that expectation in mind and be pleasantly surprised if there is a better outcome.

Healthy growth requires investment, some risk, and time. Remember, development rock stars are not simply hired, they are found within the ranks of your supporters and nurtured with care and trust over time.

About mission ADVANCEMENT

Mission Advancement Professionals (MAP), now Mission Advancement, was founded in 2007 with the objective of bringing our distinct, relationship-based fundraising philosophy to nonprofit and educational organizations. We know that authentic donor relationships lead to greater generosity, and ultimately, transformational impact. The process begins with a heartfelt connection to the mission that inspires a donor to do more than he or she ever thought possible.

Please visit our website at MissionAdvancement.com for additional resources and best practices.

