

When Looking to Diversify Your Development Office, Widen Your Lens

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Have you noticed that when talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in fundraising, the conversation frequently mentions the lack of suitable candidates of color? I've heard that to be a major gift officer you have to have access to people with money, be comfortable socializing with them, and speak their language. The implication is that these qualities are not so readily found in applicants of color.

Another aspect of the discussion is the business case for hiring for fundraising success. After all, is not the business of fundraising, well, to raise money? Given that, the business case would dictate that we hire the people who can most easily raise the most. Diversifying, then, is not necessarily a smart business move. Even foregoing that, hiring officers say that they are ready and eager to recruit diverse candidates, but they're just not getting the applicants. Diverse candidates are not applying for fundraising positions through the traditional channels, and the hiring officers don't know where to post their job listings in order to attract them.

Yes, the issues are complex. But if you want to diversify your development office, or even just start the conversation, here are a few relatively simple suggestions to consider.

1. Scrap your assumptions

The first being that all people of color—and I'll specify African Americans here—come from impoverished backgrounds, or have no experience with wealth. Some come from quite privileged backgrounds and are well used to conversing with people of significant financial means, regardless of ethnicity. Secondly, everybody with money is not white, or bigoted, or uncomfortable meeting with people unlike themselves. Even if some donors harbor certain biases, let's not assume that those feelings will prevent them from supporting institutions and causes that they care about, regardless of who makes the appeal.

As for the business case, isn't that really about maintaining the status quo? Researchers who have studied diversity for decades argue that positive outcomes associated with DEI have less to do with financial performance than with values, culture, and the kind of experiences that employees have within the organization. Unless you are committed to making a cultural change, the question of DEI is moot. But consider that with inclusion comes new relationships, new perspectives, perhaps new ways of doing things that are just as effective. Let's not immediately assume that our fundraising goals and our human ones are incompatible.

2. Widen the applicant pool

Events over the past year have galvanized people of color working in fundraising. Just while writing this piece, I've received email newsletters from the African American Development Officers Network (AADO) and Women of Color in Fundraising and Philanthropy (WOC). Both of these national, multicultural membership organizations—and there are others, regionally—include extensive job listings in their newsletters and on their websites. Hiring officers might check out these associations and do the research to find others if they're serious about recruiting well qualified, diverse candidates.

3. Be intentional about creating equity in every function in your development office

Be just as intentional in acknowledging the contributions of every job area to the overall fundraising effort. Is major gift officer the only viable career in fundraising? No way! I have worked for nonprofit organizations for most of my professional life, and I have never been a major gift officer. Prior to 2011, the majority of my career was spent at small and mid-size organizations, where a large part of the funding came from foundations, corporations, and government grants. Researching grants, writing proposals, and reporting on expenditures are very different from the work of major gift officers. But I also wrote newsletters and annual reports, edited donor publications, produced promotional videos, hosted constituent events, and handled media relations. Wearing all of those hats at nonprofit organizations gave me a thorough understanding of what fundraising and a fully-outfitted development office encompasses. While I'd had little direct experience with individual donors, I had many valuable transferable skills to bring to the table. It was no great leap for me to move into my role as Director, Stewardship Communications, a job that requires working with major gift officers to ensure the quality and timeliness of their donor correspondence.

4. Focus on Professional Development

Regardless of the applicant's background, or where you list your job opening, I can think of no career path where adequate, targeted, and ongoing training does not make a difference in the success rate of both newbies and seasoned professionals alike. Consider the transferable skills of your current employees and don't assume you have to go outside the organization for talent. Professional training and mentoring are key to diversify your development office and fundraising jobs pipeline, and retain those already in it. I would bet that with training and 1-to-1 mentoring any of my stewardship communications staff could move into the realm of direct fundraising if they so desired. Each works extensively in donor relations as researchers, writers, and data managers. Their experience and partnerships with major gift officers have given them a deep grounding in fundraising and a broad view of the profession.

So, when you're looking to diversify your development office, I hope you'll take the broad view as well. Shelve your assumptions and put in the leg work to assemble a diverse pool of candidates. Don't think you're done if you add one person of color to your roster of gift officers, and don't give up if you can't make that hire right away. Do you have a communications position to fill? How about an events manager? Or researcher? Affirm to staff and candidates how every job in development contributes to overall fundraising success, and commit to specialized and ongoing professional training to ensure that the pathways to career advancement are open to everyone. That's the cultural change we're really looking for, in our fundraising offices and beyond.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the Nonprofit Sector

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