

Six Steps On The Leadership Journey Of Development Professionals

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Valerie Harris

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Have you taken the time to assess your expertise as a development professional from a leadership perspective?

Through the execution of a range of administrative, communication, and managerial responsibilities, the development professional gains a thorough understanding of both fundraising strategies and organizational needs. Due to this collective mastery, your work offers an invaluable skill set that uniquely positions development professionals for leadership at nonprofit and philanthropic agencies. So, if a leadership role interests you, look no further than the approach you bring to the position.

Development professionals employ six practices to be successful in their role. While the demands of each activity may vary, the advancement is a step-by-step process. Embracing a long-term view of these practices not only unlocks your nonprofit's growth potential, but also builds and reveals your own professional aptitude for organizational leadership.

The forward-thinking development professional performs the following six practices:

1. Creates an environment that facilitates fundraising

Regardless of whether you do face-to-face fundraising, ensuring that the organization is prepared to fundraise is the development professional's main priority. Your work behind the scenes is to establish a structure—plans, systems and processes—by which the nonprofit

may reach its advancement goals. Organized recordkeeping is key. Systematically keep track of the following:

- **Donor metrics:** Who are your supporters, and what interests do they share? If your organization relies on individual fundraising, you should understand your nonprofit CRM system and work it to its fullest. You're able to see, for individual donors and for the organization overall, the number of asks made, gifts obtained, average size of major gifts and donor retention rate. You can access this data from year to year, so you can better determine where adjustments should be made.
- **Demographics:** Foundations and corporate funders will want to know who is benefiting from your nonprofit's services. Do you serve K-12 students? Artists? The BIPOC or LGBTQ communities? Senior citizens? How many? In what zip codes do they live? Any testimonials? You're vigilant about gathering this information through post-program surveys or via your website.
- **Required documents:** To obtain grants, you need proof of your nonprofit status or fiscal sponsor. You have on hand a copy of the organization's current annual budget as well as a budget for each program for which you're currently raising money.

Up-to-date photos of constituent events and publications that illustrate the impact of your work are readily available. Timely submissions and consistent, personalized stewardship signal to internal and external constituents that your nonprofit is ready to effectively participate in the fundraising arena.

2. Positions the organization among funders

Consider development as a marketing function. Funders will make financial gifts if what you offer aligns with their philanthropic or personal interests. Your proposals serve to gain their interest and "buy-in."

- Do the necessary market research to learn which foundations—local, regional and national—are funding nonprofits like yours. You know the specific demographic and program attributes each potential funder is seeking.
- Call or email funders with any questions about their interests and your eligibility. You participate in any information sessions that the funder is offering, online or in person.
- Use social media as part of your communications strategy to promote your mission, foster connections, and increase visibility among secured and potential funders.

3. Situates the organization within the community

Utilizing both demographic and neighborhood data, you position your organization as an active part of the service-delivery system.

- Be able to state the relevant needs of your community and how your nonprofit is addressing them.

- Understand how your program stands out from that of other organizations in your area. For instance, there may be several nonprofits that offer art programs for secondary school students, but you are one of the few entities that serve adults 18 years and older. That's a unique selling point around which to build purposeful narrative and gather testimonials.
- Be open to collaborating on programs, events, and funding opportunities with other local organizations that serve the same or complementary constituencies. Before committing to a collaborative venture, you evaluate each potential partner to ensure alignment with your organization's mission, values, and goals.

4. Develops new programming

Writing proposals introduces the opportunity for new or enhanced programming. As a development professional who is in tune with constituent needs and funder interests, you're positioned to think strategically and creatively in a way that those implementing the programming may overlook. It's not about chasing the money, but rather about enhancing your offerings to better serve, broaden, or diversify your audience.

- Share your ideas with relevant staff before committing in a proposal to a new or different take on a program.
- Consider whether you have the necessary resources to successfully implement and sustain the new initiative without compromising the quality of your existing programs.
- Starting with a small-scale or pilot project allows for innovation, gathering feedback, refining the model as needed, and expanding the program if it proves successful.

5. Monitors earned income opportunities

Developing funding proposals and gathering constituent feedback puts the development professional in a great position to assess the organization's strengths and assets. Earned income streams are a valuable strategy for diversifying revenue sources and increasing financial sustainability for a nonprofit organization.

- Consider the services, products, or experiences that your organization could offer to generate revenue. Think creatively about how existing programs can be monetized or leveraged in some way, such as through training workshops or consulting services.
- As you review the organization's budget, examine if existing earned income streams are being optimized. Nonprofits *are* allowed to do more than just break even.
- Evaluate how any earned income streams you pursue align with your organization's mission, values, and core purpose.

6. Commits to ongoing professional development

Complement the administrative, communication, and managerial expertise you've gained as a development professional with training that will broaden your perspective even more. You're already familiar with the objectives below. Prioritize seminars or online courses that build upon these professional assets to strengthen your capacity to lead:

- **Strategic planning:** You understand the importance of aligning organizational activities with the nonprofit's vision and mission. This alignment is essential for leaders who must provide strategic direction and ensure that all activities support the organization's core purpose.
- **Organizational management:** Development professionals are accustomed to juggling multiple priorities, working under stringent deadlines, and navigating sometimes challenging situations, all of which foster adaptability and resilience. Nonprofit leaders couple these qualities with skills like goal setting and resource monitoring to manage their organizations through change, adversity, and expansion.
- **Team building:** One-person development offices are often the norm at small-to-mid-sized nonprofits. But cultivating strong connections with both internal and external constituents will enhance your ability to address the organization's advancement needs and opportunities. Additionally, managing cooperative relationships is a necessary skill for any leader, who must be adept at uniting staff and stakeholders around a common goal.

Development professionals make a transformative difference in the success of nonprofits while honing essential leadership skills. These six practices, thoughtfully applied, will continue to benefit the organization long after the exemplary development professional has moved on to the next phase of their leadership journey.

Do you have a burning question related to fundraising, campaigns, donor engagement, volunteers, or nonprofit management?

Our Fundraising Coach can help! Submit your questions **now**.

