

Article

Development Councils: panacea or pain?

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Caroline McCormick shares her experiences of working with Development Councils and gives her top tips for getting it right.

In the United States, Development Councils are omnipresent - the model underlying all successful fundraising campaigns.

While most American fundraising practise has now found its translatable equivalent in the UK, Development Councils haven't reached the same degree of ubiquitous application as many of the other principles of philanthropy we've adopted.

This seems to be partly because the views of individual fundraisers and organisations towards Development Councils vary hugely. These are usually based on a single direct experience of working with a specific group of individuals.

Some view Development Councils as an invaluable resource to maximise fundraising income and others as a wasteful burden taking up valuable resources and time. In my twenty years as a fundraiser, and the last ten as a consultant, I've certainly seen examples of both.

I've come to the conclusion that Development Councils themselves are only one part of the issue; the expectations an organisation brings to them are equally important. Like all relationships, it's a two-way responsibility. Development Councils work best when they are integrated into the broader fundraising process and our expectations are realistic as to what can be achieved.

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Case study

The most successful Development Council I’ve personally established was as Director of Development at the National History Museum (2000 - 2005), where I led the successful campaign to build the Darwin Centre. The experience was also an incredible learning curve for me.

The Museum had an undeveloped fundraising income base when I arrived, with a revenue income of just over £500,000 per annum including the major sponsorship of Wildlife Photographer of the Year. I had a unique opportunity to draw on the love of many eminent individuals for this great institution as a result. I decided that at £65,000,000 the Campaign was a large enough remit for the group and that we would set up one committee for capital and one for revenue.

I was keen to keep a strong link to the Board of the Museum, as it was only just starting to become actively involved in fundraising and I didn’t want it to see fundraising as a responsibility that could be deferred to the group.

The Director and I agreed to approach current Trustee and former Arts Council Chairman Lord Palumbo, who generously agreed to take on

the role. It was confirmed that he would report on the work of the group at Board meetings. With such a chair in place, we were able to quickly assemble a remarkable group: Sir David Attenborough, Lord Winston, Richard Dawkins, Sir Richard Sykes, Sir William Castell. The list was long and, while dominated by the white males who tend to largely populate contemporary science, hugely impressive - so much so that many eminent individuals were at that time only invited to join the revenue committee.

In establishing a list of those we could approach, we undertook an audit of the skills and networks we were likely to need. Looking back, I think I could have extended the reach of the group even further. There were arguments and approaches for the project that I didn’t identify until further down the line, which could have opened up other income avenues for the project.

It’s hard to recall now what my exact expectations were for the group. I’m sure that my experience of working with similar councils at organisations such as the National Theatre meant that I knew that there would be considerable work to do before results could be reaped.

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What surprised me the most was how many of these eminent individuals actually came to the meetings. I realised very quickly that this was a remarkable commitment and that if it was something I wanted to sustain then I would need to make sure that they arrived fully briefed. Having already allocated a member of the staff team for each member of the group made this task much easier. The agenda and papers were sent out with a helpful note from their individual team lead recapping what they’d been working on with the fundraiser so that they could simply read that at the meeting. We also put spare individual copies in their named folders in case they arrived without it.

The meetings were, as a result, never where the real work took place but they were essential for other reasons. It soon became clear that the members were in company they felt comfortable in and that there was a degree of healthy competition between the group, which came from so many of them being scientific peers. This enabled us to encourage the members to open doors to funders that we simply wouldn’t have reached, known about, or perhaps even considered otherwise.

I’ve written elsewhere about Lord Winston explaining the significance of the bread wheat specimen to the Jewish community to me but

the potential the racehorse collection gave us to engage the racing community was a new angle entirely.

I also think I probably hadn’t realised that the group needed to hit the group running; interest would quickly be lost if there wasn’t a clear focus for them and a defined and achievable job to be done. In this I was extremely fortunate because the capital project was underway prior to my arrival and we were able to move to looking at the specific prospects each member could help us in cultivating.

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Key learning

Here are ten things I learnt about establishing a successful Development Council that I still try to apply in any organisation:

1. Ensure there is a clear link to the Board and a regular presence on the Board agenda
2. Appoint a Chair who sets a standard for the group
3. Make sure the members cover as broad a range of reasons to give and income sources as possible
4. Ensure the group has a clear remit
5. Don't establish the group until the work can begin
6. It will feel like more work in the beginning and results won't be immediate
7. Fundraisers will always have to facilitate the work
8. Taking part should be interesting and fun for the members
9. Think about the role and associate of the individuals after the campaign is completed
10. Always celebrate success

