

Article

Overcoming 'Lone Fundraiser Syndrome'

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‘Which lone fundraiser doesn’t recognise the scenario where you are handed development on your first day and expected to ‘just start raising some money’?’

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Are you suffering from ‘Lone Fundraiser Syndrome’?

Lucy Taylor explores the challenges of a development team of one and shares her top tips for boosting capacity.

Fundraisers can inhabit a cold and lonely world. That experience can be thrown into even sharper focus when they find themselves in a position of being the sole person within an organisation ‘responsible’ for fundraising. Small to medium arts organisations - and even some major cultural institutions - tend to have, at most, a development team of one.

Even when an organisation has a dedicated fundraiser or Development Director, the problems can be compounded by the expectation that fundraising can operate as a discrete function within an organisation.

Which lone fundraiser doesn’t recognise the scenario where you are handed development on your first day and expected to ‘just start raising some money’? That might be followed by ‘this trust application needs to go out by Friday and if you can just develop a cultivation strategy for donors (once you’ve found them) and then look after them all yourself that would be great... and we must do something about legacies.’

It is understandable and not unusual for CEOs and Artistic Directors to be greatly relieved to hand over the fundraising mantle to a dedicated development person. Problems often come, though, when senior staff don’t have enough understanding of the fundraising role to be able to support or manage the development person. How do you set appropriate objectives when you don’t really understand how that role works? How can you evaluate success if you don’t know what success looks like beyond raising money?

Then there is the rest of the organisation. Many people will recognise the situation in which they have worked really hard to cultivate a relationship with a significant potential supporter only to wince in horror as a member of the wider team handles them badly on their arrival in the building.

Let’s not forget the central issue of capacity and resourcing. One would think ‘all hands to the pumps’ would be an immeasurably more efficient fundraising approach. This doesn’t seem to play out in reality very often. A significant factor seems to be that few people actually like fundraising or feel they are good at it.

All of this adds up to a problem that is nearly always anti-strategic. Can we be strategic when the need to achieve funding for an organisation is placed firmly at the door of one person? Day to day operational pressures will always take precedence. Is it really the fault of the hard-pressed fundraiser for not getting round to writing that fundraising strategy that was in their job description or for not doing it properly? Who can blame them when they are juggling that funding application that had to be done yesterday with the time consuming task of courting donors?

Equally the whole notion of a fundraising strategy that is written and executed in isolation is problematic.

Are the ‘symptoms’ of ‘Lone Fundraiser Syndrome’ sounding all too familiar?

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Recommendations

Speak to your senior management and board

If you are a lone fundraiser speak loudly and clearly to your senior management team and Board about the need to fully embed fundraising throughout the organisation and make it a shared task. There is considerable evidence to show that arts organisations that are more successful at income generation have an organisation-wide commitment to the responsibility for fundraising.

The CASE report ‘Fundraising activity in arts, culture, heritage and sports organisations: a qualitative study’ published by DCMS in 2011 highlighted the impact this has on success:

‘More empowered and confident organisations described trustees and leaders taking a highly active role in fundraising, where less confident organisations delegated fundraising entirely to a dedicated function.’

If you are a senior manager or Board member yourself don’t just pay lip service to making fundraising an organisation-wide function. Work with your fundraiser to look at how to truly adopt a fundraising culture. Not only does this address capacity issues but more people acting as advocates in fundraising terms presents a more powerful and diverse voice for the organisation.

Making this work presents a challenge and ensuring that the same clear messages are communicated across the organisation is vital. I have seen many organisations that have invested heavily in impressive CRM ticketing systems but have failed to ensure that staff on the ground - from box office to ushers - are clear what they are supposed to say in fundraising terms.

Work with your Board

Fundraising training from Board level downwards is vital, along with clearly articulated messages about the organisation as a whole. People are scared of fundraising. Make it easy for them. Once you have trained Board members give them a clear task or project to do rather than the amorphous mass of responsibility.

Address governance issues within your Board early on in the fundraising planning process. As consultants we have worked with numerous organisations who have described their Board as ‘nice and supportive but not very proactive’. From a fundraising perspective, a passive Board isn’t really going to cut it.

This is not the fault of the Board members. They were often recruited on to the Board as influential people in their own spheres but without any understanding of what was expected from them in terms of fundraising.

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It is important and only fair to clarify this expectation and if appropriate bring new trustees on who are comfortable with a fundraising role in whatever form that takes - from advocacy or networking to more direct ‘ask’ making. Peer to peer fundraising works so increasing the number of possible peers and in turn increasing the number of people that we connect with at the right level would be a positive step.

Involve every staff member

It is important not to stop at Board and Director level. Every member of staff and all volunteers should know how to talk about the organisation’s fundraising needs. The CASE report highlighted this as a significant factor in determining the fundraising success of arts organisations:

‘The importance of organisational buy-in across functions was highlighted both in sharing the fundraising task beyond a dedicated fundraising function and in ensuring that everyone presents a positive, enthusiastic and convincing public image to facilitate fundraising’.

Give clear messages

Shout louder about the fact that the organisation is a charity. Explain the mixed funding model and that

ticket income doesn’t cover costs and articulate the organisation’s projects or fundraising priorities.

Clear messages that can be distilled into half page crib sheets about the organisation and each of its priority areas are vital.

I can still remember the embarrassment for a charity that held a highly impressive cultivation event only to find it blighted by a significant philanthropist asking a trustee what their turnover was and them being unable to give an answer.

Know when to ask for help

Once you’ve got your house in order, know what you don’t know and when to bring in external help.

Of course, by their very nature, small and medium arts organisations that tend to have a development team of one or none are unlikely to have budgets that can easily be stretched to bringing in consultants.

This needn’t be a high cost exercise though. There are ‘light touch consultancy’ options. These arrangements can be anything from regular mentoring, setting and reviewing objectives, or simply giving feedback on funding applications and case for support documents.

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Use volunteers

Use volunteers and use them well. Volunteers are a vital asset to any organisation and key players in their work-force. Ethical working with volunteers ensures that they are supported, managed appropriately and offers clear development opportunities.

Consider forming a Development Board or Committee but in doing so consider carefully what your objectives are and give them a clear and action-based remit.

Set realistic targets

Set realistic and achievable targets. Ensure they are adequately resourced but remember also that there are never any guarantees in fundraising.

Celebrate success

Perhaps the most important treatment of all for ‘lone fundraiser syndrome’ is to celebrate success and celebrate it widely. If there is no-one else there to celebrate with you then give yourself a pat on the back.

