

Fundraising, the CEO, and Servant Leadership

By

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During America's first war, an officer asked his men to cut down some trees to make a bridge. The work went slowly because there weren't enough men. Then a man with a commanding presence rode up and spoke to the officer in charge, who was urging the men to work harder but did nothing himself. "You don't have enough men for the job, do you," said the man on horseback.

"No, sir. We need some help."

"Why don't you lend a hand yourself?"

"Me, sir? Why, I'm a corporal," said the officer, rather offended by the suggestion.

"Ah, true," replied the man as he slid off his horse. He worked alongside the men until the job was done, then said as he rode off, "Corporal, the next time you have a job to accomplish and too few men to do it, you should send for the commander in chief, and I will come again."

Whether this story about George Washington is true or is as apocryphal as the one about the cherry tree, it makes a good point, and great men and women have often set the example of leadership through service. The point is particularly relevant when one considers the leader of a nonprofit organization (NPO) or nongovernmental organization (NGO) and fundraising.

The best and most successful fundraising programs involve the CEO (or president, executive director, or whatever title the leader holds). This is true because the CEO represents the image and mission of the organization, is the point of identity for the external world, has much opportunity for influencing the various audiences of the NPO or NGO, and is the most significant liaison between the internal family and the outside world.

Unfortunately, too many fundraisers find that CEO involvement, much less leadership, in fundraising efforts is a vain hope or an ephemeral dream. They complain that the CEO merely gives lip service to the concept but ultimately has an attitude of "I hired you to do it—go do it!" Some CEOs simply don't have the knowledge base or the guided experience to be involved, much less supportive. Possibly some are truly too busy running the organization, perhaps because of small budgets, lack of personnel, or inability to delegate. At best, if the CEO isn't involved or supportive, fundraising efforts aren't maximized. At worst, the unfortunate fundraising professional gets ALL the blame if efforts don't succeed, perhaps even experiencing a "guilty before proven innocent," dilemma, with no opportunity to explain lack of fundraising success.

What can the proactive CEO do to aid in achieving excellence in fundraising, and how can the chief development officer (assuming the CEO doesn't also wear this hat!) do to facilitate the comfort level and professionalism of the CEO? A few suggestions listed below might help.

1. CEOs should be involved in the fundraising planning process and have input. This doesn't mean the CEO leads out in the process, but he/she should have the opportunity to review the plan and make suggestions, particularly noting his own involvement. The fundraiser should include the CEO appropriately and seek his or her buy-in.
2. The CEO should take advantage of appropriate training opportunities which fit his or her schedule, taking care to attend the most credible best workshops that consider the value of a team effort in fundraising. The fundraiser should make such training opportunities available to the CEO and in an optimal situation, should attend as a team member.
3. The CEO should be informed on a regular basis of the progress made in accomplishing the fundraising plan. This does not mean micromanaging. It does mean regular monitoring by both the fundraiser and the CEO for achievement of mutually agreed upon goals.
4. Opportunities for engaging in fundraising-related activity, such as creating awareness, representing the organization to a multitude of audiences, writing or signing letters, interfacing with the board, and actual cultivation and solicitation of donors should be facilitated by the fundraising professional, with the CEO being proactive in also informing the fundraiser about possible opportunities.

Obviously this list could go on and our intent is to show how vital the role of the CEO is in achieving fundraising success. More than 2000 years ago, the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu wrote, "The leader is one who serves." This ancient wisdom began undergoing a revival by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. He had spent most of his professional life in management research, development and education at

AT&T. At age 60 he began a new career and established a small think tank, the Center for Applied Ethics. He got caught up in the spirit of the 60s, which questioned authority, and began a search for new sources of legitimacy. At the end of that decade he wrote "The Servant as Leader," an essay he circulated to encourage people to take on more responsibility. Successful leaders, he stated, will be those who are willing to serve—not just their superiors, to whom they have an obligation of service, but staff, board, volunteers, colleagues, constituents, and in particular, donors.

Greenleaf's concepts certainly apply to today's highly competitive climate for raising funds. An organization's success in fundraising has a greater chance when the CEO is integrally involved, works as a team member with staff and volunteers, and takes a personal interest and responsibility for the financial health of the organization. As Frederick the Great wrote in *Memoirs of the House of Brandenburg* (1758, quoted in Bartlett's), "The prince is the first servant of his state." In like manner, the CEO is also first in service of his or her organization, including the fundraising program.

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