

Inside Philanthropy

Your Philanthropy Career: Coming Into Fundraising From Another Profession



Steve Barry (right), a former salesman, struggled to get his first fundraising job. “I couldn’t understand why they didn’t see how my skills translated.”

By: Holly Hall, May 29, 2020

Transitioning into a mid- or senior-level fundraising job from an entirely different career path is not impossible, but it can be challenging.

Some people who come to fundraising after being in business for themselves, for example, find it difficult to work as part of a development team after a career spent making all the decisions. Others from high-powered corporate backgrounds struggle with the often slower pace of decision-making in charitable organizations. Still others coming from retail or sales careers ask donors for a gift too soon. Or, as some fundraising leaders have found with development hires from academia, they fail to ask at all because they spend too much time researching every nuance of a potential solicitation.

Steve Barry, a performing artist and former salesman, says he finally landed a fundraising position as assistant director of development at a youth organization after he “did some soul searching,” deciding that raising money for a good cause would be a more meaningful career than sales. But his first few interviews didn’t go well.

“I had sold thousands of dollars’ worth of cars and also mortgages worth \$1 million or more,” Barry says. “I couldn’t understand why they didn’t see how my skills translated.”

Barry made a common mistake among people looking to switch careers and get into development work, says Michael Vann, a vice president at the Aspen Leadership Group, an executive recruiting company that places fundraising professionals. The company has been

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working to increase the ranks of fundraisers, in part by encouraging nonprofit organizations to remove barriers that block new people coming to the field from other professions. Though the path for these new recruits is not always clear, they are sorely needed, considering the nationwide shortage and high turnover rates among fundraisers.

Such “nontraditional candidates,” as Vann’s company calls them, often think their experience and skills are obvious, and as a result, fail to adequately explain how their professional experience makes them qualified to raise money.

“A lot of people say, ‘I did sales, so I can do this,’ but you have to connect the dots” more explicitly for organizations hiring fundraisers, Vann says. “You might work with wealthy clients at a bank and think it would be obvious that you can work with wealthy donors, but you have to make the case and say how your experience applies. Look at responsibilities needed and say exactly how your experience allows you to fill this role, do it in a new way, or add value.”

People interviewing fundraisers, Vann adds, “are just not going to make the leap” that a nontraditional candidate can do the job, especially since they are paying more in salary than they would for an entry-level fundraiser. “They want their own language repeated back to them,” he says. They want to hear about specific responsibilities a would-be fundraiser held in previous jobs and how that will make the candidate successful in building relationships and securing gifts.

People trying to get into fundraising should also carefully examine how their current line of work compares to the working environment for fundraisers, Vann says. Not only does that help nontraditional candidates determine if fundraising is a good fit for them personally, it can also answer questions an organization might have prior to hiring them, he says.

“For example, if candidates have managed a large team and their desired role does not include a management component, they should address their desire to move into this new role head-on in their cover letter, interview or both,” Vann says. “Don’t make the institution guess why you no longer care to manage a team, or worse, to assume that your management skills are weak.”

People trying to get into fundraising after other careers should write down their core beliefs and interests, and then look for organizations that complement those personal characteristics, Vann says. “Don’t just look at want ads to find jobs you think you could do.” A second step Vann advises after identifying specific organizations that align with the would-be fundraiser’s values and interests: examining their websites to find any board members and employees they know who could provide more information or open doors to an interview.

Vann offers a third way aspiring fundraisers can connect with people inside a desirable workplace: Ask executive search firms like his if they have worked with that organization or can introduce the would-be fundraiser to one or more of its employees. “We often do know someone there or at a similar organization,” he says.

The best candidates leaving other careers for a mid- to senior-level fundraising job have a strong connection to the mission of the hiring organization, which is another reason why job candidates need to be clear on their values and interests, Vann says. A strong tie to the charitable mission, he says, “is by far the best way someone will be successful in transitioning to fundraising.”

You have to have a connection to the mission,” Vann says. “This will make your approach to donors more authentic, and the hirer will see that.”