

**FUNDRAISERS:  
CANARIES IN THE COALMINE OR  
OPPORTUNISTIC JOB HOPPERS?**



*Early coal miners had no hi-tech equipment to detect the presence of methane gas in the air. Carried below ground, bright yellow canaries sang and chirped all day. However, the birds' highly sensitive metabolism detected methane and carbon monoxide gas traces that signaled potential explosions, poisoned air, or both. (thanks to [www.petcaretips.net](http://www.petcaretips.net))*

I sometimes think fund development professionals are like canaries – chirping and singing as we go about the business of raising money for the causes we serve. I also think fundraisers are to the charitable sector what canaries were to the coal mines: a warning signal.

*When canaries were consumed by the effects of carbon monoxide, not only did they stop singing, they also swayed noticeably on their perches before falling. (Thanks again to [www.petcaretips.net](http://www.petcaretips.net) for this information.) If a canary keeled over, the miners ran for their lives.*

OK, we don't necessarily swoon, sway and keel over; the sector may not be in danger of exploding and we don't have to "run for our lives" like the miners once did, but there is a warning the charitable sector should heed.

Anecdotally, we hear stories of fundraisers leaving their jobs and moving on to new organizations in droves, "job hoppers" simply moving on to a better salary, or so some would have you believe.

But my experience and my observations of colleagues paint a different picture. Although I know of people who seem to have a habit of leaving organizations quickly, I have many more colleagues who care about the causes they're working for and who agonized over their decisions to leave shops, doing so only when they realized they could not accomplish what they were hired to do – often because of internal organizational issues.

As it turns out, research indicates that fundraisers stay *slightly longer* in their positions than non-fundraisers. In a recent study<sup>1</sup> of fund development professionals, the average duration of service of research participants to an organization was 3.5 years.

This was slightly *higher* than the average length of service among all sectors (private, government and non-profit). Perhaps the rap fundraisers get as job hoppers is ill-deserved.

Despite what the statistics show or what our perceptions may be, there is still an issue to be addressed: 3.5 years is barely long enough for a fund development professional to establish and create strong relationships with donors and then steward those relationships to facilitate meaningful support to an organization.

According to the above-mentioned study, the top two reasons fund development professionals cite for leaving their jobs are 1. the opportunity to make more money and 2. frustration with the work environment.

There's probably another article (or treatise, even) to be written about the salaries of fund development professionals. (Salary ranges seem to go from the ridiculous to the sublime, especially in a market like Toronto.) I believe many fundraisers would stay in their organizations longer if they were satisfied with their jobs, despite making less money than they could if they worked elsewhere. (Don't get me wrong, there is good reason to stand up for your right to make a reasonable wage, but at a certain point, I believe many of us in the sector are more motivated by making a difference to our communities than making an incrementally higher wage.)

So, what does it take to keep fundraisers in organizations? How is this for a start? Many of us want to work for organizations:

- that are relevant to the community AND operate effectively;
- where a culture of philanthropy exists with program staff, fund development staff and senior volunteers;
- where the fund development professionals are a part of the organization's decision making process;
- where the CEO "gets" fundraising and is appropriately involved.

Get real, you're saying to yourself. Only a superhuman CEO can deliver that kind of organization. Well, how's this for going out on a limb: ***I believe a fundraiser can only be as good as the CEO running the organization.***

To quote Simone Joyaux, "Probably more than 75% of "fundraising problems" are not fundraising problems at all. They are organizational development issues – that affect fundraising!" (I wish I had said that.) If 75% of fundraising problems are organizational development problems, you need a good CEO to address them.

So, rather than point the blame solely at fundraisers, the charitable sector needs to see the perceived transience of fund development professionals as a symptom, not as a stand alone problem. Studies have been done for years indicating there is a leadership deficit in the charitable

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<sup>1</sup> (see the summary of *The Revolving Door: A Study on the Voluntary Turnover (Intent to Stay) of Fundraisers in the Nonprofit Sector* at [http://www.afpnet.org/ka/ka-3.cfm?content\\_item\\_id=24109&folder\\_id=2326](http://www.afpnet.org/ka/ka-3.cfm?content_item_id=24109&folder_id=2326))

sector. With the exodus of the baby boomer generation from the work force in the coming decade, the voluntary sector will be left with many younger and less experienced managers leading our organizations.

If that is the case, it may be an opportunity to raise awareness of this issue so existing leaders and the thousands of emerging leaders who will lead the third sector in the future have the wherewithal to address it.

So, what can senior leaders in the sector be doing to keep their good fund development professionals and enhance the organization's chances of successful fundraising in the process?

- Senior leaders need to ensure that the 75% of fund development issues that are really organizational issues (see above) get addressed so the organization can get to the task of providing its core service and raising funds - instead of wasting energy putting out fires.
- Board members, CEOs and senior staff need to understand the fund development process. How else will they evaluate job performance and set reasonable expectations? Without an understanding of the complexities and volume of work required to develop relationships and raise funds, it is easy to impose unrealistic goals upon the fund development department. Human nature is such that one can only fail to reach unachievable goals for so long before burning out, resenting those who imposed the goals in the first place or giving up. None of those scenarios make for a fundraiser you want around or a successful fund development program. So why create an environment that generates those results?
- Senior leaders must work with fund development staff to create a culture of philanthropy throughout the organization. The people at the front lines of the service delivery must be aware of the critical role they can play in the fund development process, whether it's medical professionals, academics or social service program staff. A successful fund development program is a team effort. Senior leaders are in a position to facilitate a culture that encourages, or better yet, insists on cross-pollination between fund development staff and other staff and volunteers.
- Educational programs training and teaching this and the next generation of charitable sector leaders need to incorporate sessions on senior managers' roles vis a vis fundraising. Successful fundraising is a team effort and everyone must be aware of and have the skills to perform their role in order to succeed.

**What responsibility do we, as philanthropy professionals have?** Surely, we are not blameless and must do our own part to make a difference.

- Firstly, we need to be aware of our skills and limitations. There are myriad opportunities for fund development professionals in Canada. Because of the shortage of experienced fundraisers, the opportunity to accept a job beyond one's skill level is available. We do ourselves, our profession, the organization that hired us and the sector a disservice each time we accept a job for which we are not prepared. If you're offered a position that is beyond your skill level, make sure you have the support you need so you can learn on the job and grow professionally instead of simply being in over your head.

- Do your homework about an organization before taking the leap to the next job. Do whatever due diligence you can before you move to minimize the possibility that the cultural “fit” is not right – for you or the organization.
- Get the broader skills you need to do an effective job. Don’t rest simply on being a good fundraising tactician. If you’re going to support the sector well, you must also be familiar with organizational issues beyond fundraising: governance, finance, change management... The list goes on. With grounding in organizational development and other skills, you can play a more meaningful role in your organization.
- We need to educate our colleagues, bosses and volunteers that fundraising cuts horizontally across an organization. What happens in one area affects other areas, including fundraising. So, we need to be involved in decisions in areas other than fundraising, since they impact on our ability to do our job. We need to advocate for our right to be at the table where organizational decisions are being made.

We can throw up our hands and bemoan a lack of leadership, volunteers who don’t understand fundraising or sensational media stories that seem to question the integrity of the sector as a whole.

Or, we can do our best to make a difference.

As humans, we invariably do both. In the future, may we all do more of the latter and less of the former.