Nine Tips for Making Development Staff Adhere

By Dan Cooperman

It happens all too frequently. A high-prospect donor calls in with a question for her giving officer — a development staffer or the department director herself. But the person on the other end of the phone is forced to say: “I’m afraid she’s no longer working for us. How can we help?”

Staff turnover in opera fundraising is real, and it’s alarming. The skills of development professionals, as much as they may be valued by opera companies, are also highly transferrable: not just in the performing arts, but also across the nonprofit spectrum. The U.S. nonprofit sector has ballooned in recent decades — from 300,000 organizations in 1970 to 1.6 million in 2013 — but the pool of skilled fundraisers has not kept pace. “The need for fundraisers far outstrips the supply,” says nonprofit consultant Penelope Burk, author of Donor-Centered Leadership. “It puts a lot of power in the hands of the practitioner.”

In other words, development people are highly poachable. But keeping them on board is a matter of critical importance. Considering the role that contributed revenue plays in opera — in some cases, as high as 78 percent of the budget — the relationships that a company forges with its donors are crucial to its survival. Frequent shifts in development staff can strain those ties to the breaking point.

The figures can be discouraging. In OPERA America’s 2016 Development Benchmarking Study, companies reported an annual turnover rate in fundraising departments of 30 percent. Hiring a replacement took, on average, two or three months, with some positions remaining unfilled for six months or more. Another complication is that opera development staffers skew young: A full 30 percent of them are under 30. According to Burk, the average fundraiser stays two and a half years in a position, and the average tenure drops to a mere 16 months among the under-30 set.

Those short stays are especially disheartening when you take into account the learning curve for development jobs: It generally takes from 10 months to a year for a development person to feel confident in her position. This means that opera companies are getting on average just four to six months of full-capacity work from the younger members of their development teams.

Turnover is costly; in fact, Burk
estimates the cost of a non-management staff departure as 120 percent of the person's salary. That figure includes vacation payout, fees for posting the position or hiring a recruiter, potential head-hunting expenses and, most significantly, the "productivity gap": Throughout the whole period in which the departing staff member winds down her efforts, the manager concentrates on making a new hire; subsequently, while the new team member begins training, the development department loses out on valuable donor-interface time. Worse still: When their relationships with their giving officers are severed, roughly 25 percent of donors make smaller gifts, delay their contributions or stop giving altogether.

But although the issue of staff retention can be fraught, it isn’t hopeless. Successful development officers have uncovered key tactics that promote staff retention. Here are some key recommendations for keeping staffers in place.

It’s perhaps not surprising that salary is often a leading reason why development staff move on. Factors like student loans and the rising costs of living in metropolitan areas only add to the appeal that a larger paycheck offers.

An opera company will almost definitely not have the resources to compete with the salaries offered by deep-pocketed hospitals or universities, but it should certainly try to maintain parity with other local arts organizations. "If you look at the Association of Fundraising Professionals [AFP] salary grid, you’ve got a high, medium and low range," says Burk. "If you’re below that range, you’re shooting yourself in the foot."

Greg Robertson, chief advancement officer at Houston Grand Opera, recommends open conversations with colleagues at other local arts institutions to gauge the going rates for development personnel. Meanwhile, both the AFP and OPERA America offer salary analysis. Even though it may not seem possible to add money to a tight budget for the purpose of raising salaries, Robertson argues that it’s an essential step toward good financial health.

"As a field, we underinvest in fundraising staff," he says, "but the only way to grow these days is through contributed support. And that requires staff."
Like professionals in any category, development staffers are looking to build the skills that will enable them to sustain a career. It’s one thing to tell a staff member what he needs to do to accomplish the company’s goals; it’s another to help him achieve his own goals in the process. But a manager who acknowledges this basic professional need will build loyalty among his staffers.

Mentorship at HGO’s development department starts the first week on the job. Robertson sends his staffers out on donor visits almost immediately, coaching them through the whole process — and allowing them to make mistakes. “Donors understand when mistakes are made,” says Sneja Tomassian, Cincinnati Opera’s director of development. “Most of the time they laugh and say, ‘Yeah, that’s necessary to grow.’”

The mentorship role may well include an acknowledgment that the employee isn’t bound to the company for life. “We tell people, ‘We’re going to make an investment in your professional skills,’” Robertson says. “’We’re going to invest in your training. We’re going to do one-on-one work with you. We’re going to do whatever we think we can do to make you a successful development professional. And hopefully that will be here at HGO.’”

As much as you want to minimize turnover, it also pays to acknowledge that your staffers’ professional paths may one day lead them out the door. In fact, furthering their long-term career goals may be a good way of avoiding too-hasty departures. Lisa Bury, development director at Seattle Opera, encourages employees to discuss their next steps with her. “But you have to be willing to hear me say that I believe it’s too soon,” she says. “I may say, ‘These are things you still need to work on, and this is how you can do it here.’”
Don’t look at professional development as a perk, but as an essential tool — one that will benefit the company as much as the staffer himself.

Conferences — like OPERA America’s Opera Conference, the Association of Fundraising Professionals’ International Fundraising Conference and the Tessitura Learning and Community Conference — offer some of the most all-encompassing chances for staffers to expand their professional horizons, exposing them to best practices in areas like major gifts, planned giving, special events and grantwriting. True, when you figure in the costs involved — conference fees, airfare, hotels and meals, not to mention lost time at the office — they’re expensive propositions. But as learning opportunities, they’re hard to beat. Meanwhile, sending a staffer to a conference is an unmistakable vote of confidence. For this reason, Cincinnati Opera’s Tomassian gives one or two staff members a chance to attend the Opera Conference before she herself takes a spot. “We give them opportunities to improve their lives and professional growth,” she says. “When companies make people sit in front of their computers all the time, they lose staff.”

Regional AFP chapters and other service organizations may provide less expensive learning opportunities, as well as let staffers build networks with local peers. Meanwhile, some companies offer their own professional-development sessions. Seattle Opera’s Bury brings in local speakers to lead sessions that help staffers identify their core strengths. Robertson heads up his own group sessions in fundraising skills — how to get an appointment, how to lead into an “ask” — augmenting them with one-on-one coachings.

Fundraising should be a full-company effort. When a box-office manager facilitates a gift, a production team member leads a backstage tour or a trustee asks a major donor out to dinner, it’s a sign to development personnel that the entire company takes responsibility for cultivating donations. But if fundraisers feel like the entire duty is on their shoulders, it will lead to stress and burnout. Needless to say, a company-wide commitment to philanthropy needs all-out support from above. Seattle Opera has gone so far as to issue an official “Culture of Philanthropy” statement, requiring “everyone — board members, volunteers and staff in all departments at all levels” to “act as ambassadors for the company.” Meanwhile, fundraisers can have a huge impact by learning to “manage up”: keeping the lines of communication open to board members, general directors and colleagues in other departments, letting them know the ways that they are needed to support development efforts.

LOYALTY BUILDERS

Long-term development staffers list the elements that keep them on board

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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>89%</td>
<td>Commitment to the mission</td>
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<td>68%</td>
<td>Inclusion in decision-making</td>
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<td>67%</td>
<td>A high-performance team</td>
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<td>64%</td>
<td>A boss who values employees’ decisions</td>
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<td>56%</td>
<td>A workplace culture of support for fundraising</td>
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<td>55%</td>
<td>Ability to balance work with personal and family needs</td>
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Figures courtesy of Cygnus Applied Research
The nonprofit sector is notorious for its long hours. In opera fundraising, not only is the office work tough and demanding, but staffers are often expected to spend their evenings at performances. It’s a formula for burnout.

That’s why savvy managers put a premium on work/life balance, keeping an eye out for staff exhaustion, and taking steps to counteract it. “When you’re exhausted, you’re not very interesting,” says Lisa Bury. “Donors want and deserve to talk to interesting people.” Andrew Morgan, deputy director of development at San Francisco Opera, makes sure that staffers know they don’t have to attend performances unless their presence is required. If a staffer does need to stay out late, he’ll encourage her to take her time coming in the next morning.

Many companies allow their staff flexible schedules, remote hours and comp time. “At Cincinnati Opera, as long as your tasks are completed, you can take any time you need to take,” says Tomassian. “Honestly, the policy obligates us to work better.” One way the company demonstrates its respect for work/life balance is by closing its offices between Christmas and New Year’s as a gift to the staff.

Greg Robertson prefers not to talk about “balance” so much as “work/life integration”: a concept that brings with it a high degree of flexibility. “Realistically, if I have a sick child during the workday, I have to deal with that,” he says. “But if a donor calls me late at night, I need to talk to them. It’s not about compartmentalizing, it’s about integrating.”

“Flexibility is as important as salary, if not more so,” says Burk. “The role of management isn’t overseeing whether someone’s sitting in the office, but overseeing the fundraising strategy and seeing whether it’s being reached. Supervision? Yes, or you aren’t doing the job of a manager. But the employee should have as much flexibility as possible to get the job done.”

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