

Philanthropy Officers: Supporting and Securing these Forgotten Treasures

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Most health care philanthropy organizations are in a constant state of seeking funds for the betterment of their organizations and missions. This takes place primarily through initiative-based, [wave campaigns](#). This constant state of campaigning remains exciting; however, the potential for exhaustion and inevitable staff turnover remains high. Through the many different buckets of campaigning—infrastructure, case and communications, volunteers, prospects, donors and more—the philanthropy team and leaders serve as the backbone of these initiatives. There is an honest reciprocity in philanthropy. Nothing happens in philanthropy without donors. There are no donors without the team members who are actively identifying, engaging and connecting prospects with the organizations’ top priorities. The philanthropy gift officers are the catalysts who ensure successful philanthropy and mission achievement happen. Often overworked and underappreciated, these forgotten treasures of philanthropy are becoming more of a short-term placeholder instead of a long-term, productive contributor that can be a win-win for all involved. How can we keep these treasures in our organizations and support them to continually connect with those within and outside of our hospital walls?

THE CHALLENGES

Many health care organizations are frustrated with the short-term tenure situations because the professional energy required to hire and onboard new staff is both expensive and time-consuming. Frustrations continue to build as we recognize the tenure needed to be successful doesn’t match ongoing turnover. Successful philanthropy work requires continuous relationship

building and cultivating. Those relationships often take months, even years, to create as gift officers build trust with donors while helping them realize the impact their gifts can make. The direct conflict in timelines is the unfortunate trend seen in our industry with a median tenure of gift officers ranging from 16-18 months.¹ It is nearly impossible to form meaningful relationships that can result in transformational gifts if there is a revolving door of gift officers. A recent statistic estimates that 51% of fundraisers say they will leave their current nonprofit within two years.² Therefore, it appears this challenge will continue.

Not only is there a conflict in tenure versus relationship-building but also in the expensive and time-consuming efforts to find and replace gift officers. According to The Advisory Board, the direct cost of replacing these employees is \$66,500. When we measure the cost of the loss of donor relationships equaling around \$2.7 million per employee, the negative impact becomes critical.³ Let's consider this alarming statistic again. **The financial impact of losing one philanthropy officer is a \$2.7M loss to the organization, without including the costs of recruiting and onboarding the next new hire!** There is no dispute of the long-term gift officers' jeweled status.

There are many reasons why employees leave their jobs, but several challenges have been specifically identified by fundraisers:

- Unclear roles
- Unrealistic expectations around philanthropy goals
- Insufficient compensation
- Dysfunctional organizational cultures
- Limited resources and organizational support
- Lack of upward mobility
- Boards and chief executives who do not value or support fundraising
- Fierce competition by nonprofits to hire strong philanthropy talent⁴

The Chronicle of Philanthropy reinforces these short-tenure challenges with two key findings noted from a 2019 survey: 84% of fundraisers say they feel "tremendous pressure" to succeed while 55% of fundraisers respond they "often feel unappreciated" in their work. Employees who choose nonprofit fundraising roles are immensely dedicated to their missions and the burnout rate can be high as they pour themselves into their work in often understaffed offices. Exhaustion is cited as one of the major reasons that staff exit.⁵



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MOVING FORWARD

What can organizational executives do to increase leadership and team retention as well as staff satisfaction? Start by simply asking employees what they want.⁶ By doing this, employees lose the impression that management isn't listening or that the communication is top-down and one-sided. Of course, asking and listening are just the beginning. Follow-through is vital in establishing credibility and trust.

What else can be done to retain philanthropy high performers?

- **Create opportunities to recognize and honor individual top performers publicly.** While leadership must also be commended for team jobs well done, avoid giving all the kudos to executives only. Give credit directly where credit is due...among the team members.
- **Give high performers greater autonomy with clear guidelines, expectations and goals.** Earning and cultivating trust among the entire organization should be rewarded with increased decision making and independence.
- **Offer more access to the CEO, board members and other executives.** Integration and collaboration among the C-Suite and board members affirms confidence in decisions, work ethic and ability to successfully lead teams and organizations.
- **Provide greater ability to work remotely and maintain a flexible schedule.**⁷

People often form an impression in the first seven seconds of meeting someone. What vibes are coming from your staff members? Much of the dissatisfaction (and satisfaction!) can begin early in an employee's tenure. Strategic onboarding is critical to making the meaningful connections between employees and organizations. In this process, newcomers learn the attitudes, knowledge, skills and behaviors required to be successful within their institutions.⁸ Executives must work with the human resources team to ensure onboarding is complete, transparent and values-based. They must ensure the contagious attitudes are positive and not negative.

In Part 2 of this series, we will review how the six essential characteristics of strategic onboarding can be implemented to ensure newcomers have a smooth entry into their new roles. Until then, let's get started on these initial steps to ensure we keep these forgotten treasures involved in our organizations for the long haul.

About the Authors: [Heather Wiley Starankovic, CFRE, CAP](#), and [Pamela Ronka Maroulis, CFRE](#), are Principal Consultants with Accordant. Pam and Heather remain inspired by all things within health care philanthropy, with a special dedication to supporting and recognizing staff members along with the desire to create programs that keep talented and dedicated servant leaders within the field. You can reach Heather by email at Heather@AccordantHealth.com or by connecting through [LinkedIn](#). You can reach Pam by email at Pam@AccordantHealth.com or by connecting through [LinkedIn](#).

¹ *You Had Me at Hello*, Sarah Andrews, AHP Healthcare Philanthropy Journal, Fall 2016.

² *Why Fundraisers Leave and How to Keep Them*, Heather Joslyn, Chronicle of Philanthropy, August 6, 2019.

³ *Fundraiser Talent Management Toolkit: Resources for Achieving Breakthrough Retention and Productivity*, The Advisory Board Company, Philanthropy Leadership Council, 2015.

⁴ *Hiring and Keeping High-Performing Fundraisers*, Dan Nevez, Campbell & Company, February 24, 2020.

⁵ *Why Fundraisers Leave and How to Keep Them*, Heather Joslyn, Chronicle of Philanthropy, August 6, 2019.

⁶ *Keep High Performers Longer*, Matthew Lang and Matthew Broadbent, AHP Healthcare Philanthropy Journal, Spring 2018.

⁷ *Hiring and Keeping High-Performing Fundraisers*, Dan Nevez, Campbell & Company, February 24, 2020.

⁸ *Organizational Socialization: The Effective Onboarding of New Employees*, Bauer, T.N., and B. Erdogan, In S. Zedeck (Ed.), *APA Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology*, Vol. 3: *APA Handbooks in Psychology*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.