Employee Retention—

Eight Ways the Development Team Can Help

Putting aside for a moment the impact on workloads, the time may have come for development professionals to expand their role into Human Resources. The Development office may be the ideal staging area for any non-profit organization's employee retention program. Fund-raisers have both the mission and the necessary skills to play a key role in encouraging employees to "stay with us."

Even in a tough economy, organizations face turnover. As Baby Boomers eventually retire, demographers expect a huge and lasting labor shortage. Health care already feels the pinch, with widespread vacancies among nurses, technologists, and others.

The cost of recruiting and training just one health professional can sometimes exceed $50,000. Countless additional dollars go down the drain whenever a staffing shortage forces service cutbacks. To attract top personnel, most hospitals now offer signing bonuses, and some go all out, with Hawaiian vacations or free maid service for new hires. No wonder hospitals are working harder to *hold on* to their best people, inspiring their loyalty while preparing them to move up through the ranks.

As shortages spread beyond health care, employee retention is moving toward center stage in every sector, especially for costly leadership positions. Smart leaders are already looking beyond the basics—good salaries, comfortable working conditions, and standard benefits such as pensions—to find new ways of encouraging employees to stick around.

Soon they will turn to their organization's Development staff for help. At least, they should.

In principle, the purview of Development already extends beyond charitable giving. If it did not, business cards would read "vice president of fundraising" or "fundraising associate." Instead, we use the word "development," and it is a good word. The mission of the best Development programs is to develop ***resources***—not just dollars but also great ideas and enthusiastic support—for the general betterment of the organization. Some institutions prefer the word "advancement" (as in the Office of Health Science Advancement at UC Davis Health System), but it amounts to the same thing: a mission more global than fund-raising alone.

In a frugal world, development professionals ought to save, protect, and nurture *existing* resources as well—not just bring in new ones. Thus, it stands to reason that with the growing need to retain and, yes, develop personnel, the Development team should be asked to help.

It is no stretch to see *how*. The skills are already in place. Development professionals need only do more of what they already do best:

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1. **Cultivate relationships.** This is why you were hired in the first place, because you are good at it, and your organization's board and senior executives know it. Employee retention is all about making a positive impression, motivating participation, and inspiring loyalty. Employees don't stay with an organization long term solely because of their paycheck. They stay because they feel a commitment. Sound familiar? In this regard, employees are just like donors.

2. **Build the case.** Fund-raisers are like lawyers; before they approach the jury (i.e. donors), they think through and articulate the compelling reasons for saying yes. You can provide a valuable service to your organization by laying out the strongest possible case for good people to stay with this one employer throughout their careers.

3. **Communicate.** The most powerful case in the world won't do the job if the light stays hidden under a barrel. Development professionals tend to be good writers and speakers. As every fundraiser knows, nothing motivates like a compelling message well conveyed. Help get the story out that this is a terrific place to work and that opportunities abound here. Help shape employee perceptions about complex issues and policies. Rather than supplanting the Communications office, take responsibility for *special* announcements (perhaps explaining why a beloved building must close) and documents (such as a pride-building history of the organization).

4. **Plan and implement strategy.** A campaign is a campaign, whether the goal is to raise a million dollars or keep a thousand nurses on the job.

5. **Conduct employee surveys.** A major motivation for workplace loyalty is the degree to which individuals feel "heard." You already know how to engage people in this way (What is a feasibility study, after all, if not a survey with a "hidden" agenda to engage participants?) Ten years ago, when two large non-profits merged, their newly united Development office took responsibility for surveying every employee on a range of topics. It was a critical first step toward building a new corporate culture; today, employee retention remains impressively high.

6. **Produce special events.** Experts agree that social activities, however corny they may seem, do contribute to employee loyalty, especially when they involve recognition. Once you've planned a golf tournament or an annual ball, you're ready for anything. Make time every year to help with employee events.

7. **Educate donors and invite them to give.** Employee retention costs money—not as much as the endless cycle of recruitment, but money all the same. If donors understand the value of the effort, charitable dollars will gravitate toward the cause. The San Francisco-based Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation has contributed many million to improve the quality of nursing in the Bay Area. This historic gift acknowledges the employee shortage and the role that philanthropy

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can play in ameliorating it. Make sure donors know the case for employee retention. (They will appreciate the cost savings.) Invite donors to support continuing education, employee events, and special projects.

8. **Model the successful "Ask."** Donors give because you ask them. The same applies to employees. They may be more inclined to stay with an organization where the leaders explicitly say, "Please stay. You really matter." As a fund-raiser, you know the words, body language and etiquette required for a successful solicitation. A little management coaching from you could make a big difference in how employees perceive the sincerity of every message from the boss.

None of this is to suggest that Development should stage a coup against Human Resources. On the contrary, the goal should be to free up HR for more primary tasks. A supportive role for Development, with HR still wearing the crown, may make the most sense. At the very least, this means support as needed. At most, it could mean a new role for Development as the guiding spirit for the entire employee retention program.

Such programs are multi-disciplinary, involving Communications, Continuing Education, Professional Services (Nursing, Faculty, whatever), and even Facilities (think "Employee-of-the-Month" parking), as well as HR. Even Information Technology gets into the act, whenever desktop computers are used to solicit employee opinions, deliver continuing education, and facilitate virtual collaboration. Clearly, such a diverse function requires coordination. It is a skill found aplenty in the Development office.

In this age of shrinking revenue, the Development staff already has a full plate just raising money. Still, if there aren't enough good employees to keep the ship afloat, what will there be to raise money for? The skills and sensitivities of Development can make a valuable contribution to workforce stability. For long-term impact, this may be the best investment you and your organization can make right now.

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Gail Terry Grimes has interviewed, surveyed, educated and, she hopes, motivated tens of thousands of employees and other stakeholders in her career as a communications consultant to the non-profit community.

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