

Small but Mighty: Retaining Top Fundraisers Over Big Competition

Deborah Legrove, CFRE, President of *crawfordconnect*



Poaching.

It's very common in the field of fundraising professionals. Poaching can also be very costly for small/mid-size nonprofits or those in locations outside of major urban centres: a substantial investment in recruiting and training, lost productivity and the expense of re-recruiting and re-training.

Within the first six months, 86% of new hires make the decision to stay or leave, according to a [study](#)¹ by The Aberdeen Group. Among the reasons fundraisers most often cite when they leave an organization:

- don't know what they are supposed to be trying to accomplish
- don't feel personally valued
- don't receive the support they need to do the job
- lack opportunity for growth: new challenges, learning and career advancement
- don't feel they are fairly compensated
- don't feel like they belong among the people they work with

In our experience, it takes a minimum of one year for a new hire to contribute tangible difference to an organization.

So how do you encourage your valued fundraising professionals to stay beyond six months and continue contributing to your mission?

When your new employees feel engaged, connected with the organization and satisfied with their job, they are more likely to stay. Therefore you need to make retaining your fundraising professionals as important a priority as recruiting them. Here are some strategies to consider.

Provide comprehensive onboarding support

Making a good first impression is critical to employee engagement. This requires providing your new hire with an onboarding process that quickly introduces them to your culture, initiates the relationships and provides the tools they need to succeed.

Effective onboarding helps your new fundraiser understand and navigate culture, structure and expectations. Most important, it helps your valued fundraiser to *feel valued*.

Consider what needs to happen, and when, to help the new hire feel welcome and comfortable in this new work environment. Identify all of the requirements necessary for the individual to be effective, such as an orientation to policies, procedures, systems, technology. Make all of this immediately available, along with introductions to the people who can provide assistance along the way.

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Create a career development plan

A key part of the onboarding process involves developing a career plan for the new hire – their roadmap to success. Start by aligning your new fundraiser's job and career goals with those of your organization so you can identify the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies that support those goals.

Find out their objectives and interests and help them develop these. This will provide your fundraiser with a long-term vision of their evolving role within your organization.

Establish short-term and medium-term goals that mutually address both fundraiser and organization priorities. Attach timelines to ensure goals are measurable and achievable. This will equip your new fundraiser with a clear picture of their evolving role in the organization and help both parties track progress. Using these goals as a guide, identify the skills and competencies required. Then map the professional development and training needed to develop these.

Here's a success story that demonstrates how well aligning fundraiser and organizational goals can work. While recruiting a director of development for a client, we learned the top candidate wanted to acquire capital campaign experience as part of her career path. As it happened, the client organization was soon going to be launching its own capital campaign. Leveraging this fortunate timing, we helped our client adjust the director of development job description to provide this individual with a significant role in the upcoming campaign. Fast forward several years: the candidate accepted the job offer, the client completed a very successful capital campaign, and the director of development was promoted to chief development officer and continues working for this organization in an even more valued role.

Establish regular communication, accountability and feedback

To ensure effective integration of the new fundraiser, provide frequent communication and productive feedback. If your fundraiser is a millennial, according to the [Harvard Business Review](#)², this individual wants feedback 50% more often than other employees.

Millennials' preferred source of feedback is their manager. So the new fundraiser's manager should schedule regular meetings to recognize good performance, provide constructive feedback and to discuss support and resources needed to bridge any gaps. Encourage the new employee to ask questions and to share insights and concerns.

Keep your (especially millennial) fundraising professional engaged

Since increasing numbers of professional fundraisers today are millennials, retaining them requires extra engagement effort. A [2015 Gallup Poll](#)³ found they are the least engaged of the workforce: fewer than 29% are engaged at work.

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How to keep them involved and productive? Provide ongoing opportunities for:

- work-life balance with flexible schedules
- work that makes a positive difference in the world
- taking on more responsibilities
- providing input on important issues
- sharing leadership, less hierarchy, more collaboration
- support and appreciation
- technology that enables them to work effectively

Your nonprofit or charity needs the right people in place, especially the right fundraisers, to achieve your mission. When you are small, you have to be mighty.

By developing a strong approach to recruiting and retaining talented fundraising professionals, you can win the best people over the biggest competitors.

For ideas regarding how to recruit a star fundraiser, read the first article in this two-part series: [Small but mighty: Recruiting top fundraisers over big competition](#).

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¹Onboarding Key to Retaining, Engaging Talent, April 16, 2016, shrm.org

²Millennials want to be coached at work, February, 2015; hbr.org

³Majority of U.S. Employees Not Engaged Despite Gains in 2014, February 26, 2016; Gallup.com