



## It's More Than Just the Numbers: Creating a Robust Resource Development Plan

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The development plan is a crucial tool that helps staff and board members channel energy and resources to both diversify income sources and feed external



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communications. It is most successful when tied to the specific organization's strategic and programmatic goals, tailored to fit available skill sets and resources, and in alignment with the overall mission. In short, one size does not fit all.

The planning process should be a collaborative effort involving professional fundraising staff, executive leadership and governing board members. If a volunteer fundraising committee exists, input from its members is also helpful.

Any plan for generating revenue should be considered as carefully as how that revenue will be spent. It is good practice to simultaneously create and adopt both the organization's annual budget and its development plan.

Development plans are meant to be dynamic. Progress toward goals is evaluated and adjusted throughout the fundraising cycle. If something falls short, there are options for recovery. A good plan has structure but also the flexibility to absorb opportunities that present themselves.

The following twenty-one points were conceived to guide organizations through the process of creating a development plan. The first seven points are designed to match your organization's capacity and philanthropic culture with its vision. The next seven points are

guidelines for choosing specific methods and considering what resources are actually available. The final seven points are designed to measure progress and plan next steps.

These questions might not be prioritized here in an order that follows your agency's planning process, therefore they have been organized into three distinct and interchangeable sections. Our attempt is to offer an approach that can be customized to fit each planning group's specific mission and organizational culture. Use them as guiding principles therefore, rather than gospel truths.

### Section One: Matching the Organization's Capacity and Philanthropic Culture to its Vision

In this section, the planning group is urged to first consider the environments in which the activities will occur, both external and internal. Excellent results are possible when action is grounded in a healthy philanthropic culture and activities are matched to the capacity of the people charged with raising funds.

#### 1. What are our fundraising expectations and are they reasonable?

Start with what you know and where your organization currently stands. Are you fundraising for the entire budget or just a portion of it? Where are funds coming from now?

Reputation matters, and it can affect your fundraising expectations. How is your organization positioned within the larger community, and how it is viewed (or not) by other providers, donors, current or potential clients? Are you known for exceptional service? An organization with an excellent reputation might benefit from "outside" endorsements from better known ally organizations or community leaders. Donors who are pleased with how you use their contributions are more likely to spread the word. Satisfied clients also make

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excellent spokespeople.

Alternatively, is your organization the “best kept secret in town?” If so, then your goal of attracting new support will rely first on your ability to expand awareness and demonstrate capability.

Think carefully about your organization’s long-range goals. Are you planning to continue doing what you have always done, making minor tweaks to improve delivery of services? Or is your goal to be at the cutting edge, fostering innovation? What does the greater community need your organization to be, and how might you rise to the occasion? Although these are questions for leadership to explore during the strategic visioning stage, for the purpose of drafting a development plan it helps to understand where the organization fits now and where it might be heading. Development is not just about asking for money; it is about being in dialogue with donors. Knowing the desired arc of your organization might give you something interesting to include as you craft campaigns, write newsletter stories, and talk with those in a position to help.

## 2. What is our organization’s philanthropic culture?

The organization that sees its donors as partners in the work it does is a step ahead of those that treat donor contributions as mere transactions. Consider how your organization engages with donors.

At a basic minimum, we suggest that you commit to welcoming every donor as being invaluable to the organization’s mission, regardless of gift size. If you can achieve this, the donor loyalty you foster will likely reduce that dreaded attrition rate. You might also decide that donors who make gifts of a certain size ought to receive extra attention.

At the Public Justice Center, one aspect of philanthropic culture we are interested in understanding is how to expand sources of support that are appropriate to our geographic reach and mission. As a legal advocacy group combatting injustice on behalf of people living in poverty, the majority of those we serve are people of color. Over the past fifteen years, although we have deliberately expanded our development strategies to attract donors outside of elite foundations and the legal profession, the majority of our donors are still white. We are looking at our program strategies through the lens of race equity and, at the same time, thinking about how to garner support from a broader

community that includes people of color and from a wider economic range. Additionally, we are striving to attract donors from multiple generations and geographic locations. We believe that the diversity of our donors makes us stronger and more capable of achieving — and reflecting — our mission.

## 3. Is our development staff equipped to succeed?

One of the most basic considerations of any plan is whether those assigned to execute it have the tools they need to be successful. First, determine which staff members are on the team. Do they have jobs that are reasonably apportioned or are they expected to perform miracles of the “loaves and fishes” sort? Also, are staff resources sufficient to support an expanded number of donors or gifts received? Increased gifts will certainly help the organization advance its mission. However, if the team is not equipped to record, track and steward those donations, success might be short-lived if donors end up redirecting their giving to other agencies where they feel more appreciated.

The executive director is responsible for the organization’s financial health, and is often the best ambassador for its mission. Is your executive director accessible to donors, or is she tied to a desk, responsible for endless grant reports and administrative tasks? Can you reassign those tasks so the executive director has time to cultivate better relations with donors and partners?

Staff opportunities for advanced learning and skill-building should be built into the plan. While trial-by-fire experiences may sometimes be necessary, the organization is better served when its fundraisers, executive director included, learn best practices through workshops and peer interaction.

Finally, a word about restricted access to donors. Although sometimes there might be good reason for only one person being allowed to talk to “their” donors, we recommend that this be the exception rather than the rule. The risk you run by doing this is having donations disappear when the contact person leaves the board or job role. As stewards of the mission, our job is to inspire donors to connect to the organization, not to individual personalities.

## 4. Is our board equipped to succeed?

The same considerations apply to volunteer fundraisers as to staff. Are your volunteer solicitors adequately briefed and oriented on their fundraising role when recruited? Since we rely on their help to meet our goals, consider how to best support them.

Does your organization invest in their success at raising money by supplying coordinators for committees, periodic refresher courses, adequate donor information and opportunities to practice their approach? Plan to track board member attendance and participation at meetings as well as recruitment/engagement of others, and to take appropriate action in order to prevent your board from growing “stale.” Most importantly, encourage all of your board members to first be donors themselves. It is much easier to invite others to support a cause once a personal commitment has been made.

**5. Do our fundraising goals tie in to our organization’s strategic plan and/or our program area’s annual work plan?**

Effective fundraising plans are designed to help teams raise the money necessary to carry out the work of their organizations. Our “tier one” goal is to raise the money required to accomplish our basic program objectives. Our “tier two” or “stretch” goal gives us an opportunity to build a cushion, serve more clients, or otherwise achieve more than the basics. We like to incorporate these aspirations into our development plans.

The planning team will also need to consider what happens if goals are not met. Is the plan flexible enough to fill shortfalls by creating new opportunities? For example, if an event fails to generate the revenue budgeted, could the team mobilize around face-to-face donor solicitations?

**6. Will we spend money to raise money?**

It takes money to raise money. The planning team can build the perfect work plan ripe with lots of good ideas; but if the organization fails to allocate enough money to underwrite the prescribed efforts, the plan might fail before it launches. Make sure all activities have the necessary budgets allocated to them.

**7. What is the role of program staff and consumers in fundraising?**

The development plan includes roles for the people who deliver programs, as well as those who benefit from them. Each group has a unique perspective of the organization and has stories to tell that donors would appreciate. How will you invite these people to participate?

Do program staff members know that it is part of their work to help gather stories or report on victories won? Have you explained to them the value of their participation? Plan to “connect the dots” for staff and

clients by reporting back on gifts resulting from their efforts.

**Section Two: Creating the Plan and Understanding What Resources We Have and Need**

If we understand the environment in which we are operating, we can construct the road we want to travel.

**8. What vehicles (strategies, methods) will we use to attract funds?**

Direct mail, special events, bequest campaigns, appeals to specific professional groups and so forth: each of these is a vehicle for encouraging gifts to support the mission. If your organization is new to fundraising, what might you realistically be equipped to manage? If your organization has been raising money for years, consider which methods worked well in previous years. Is it worthwhile to replicate a previously successful strategy? Also, consider whether the strategies you choose are in line with your organization’s mission and the values you hold dear.

Some methods are effective year after year. Others need more time in between, because they require effort that outstrips your normal capacity.

Think too about which vehicles are appropriate for your mission. A wine tasting happy hour sends the wrong message if its purpose is to raise funds for an addiction recovery program. This is where a thoughtful discussion and even a gift acceptance policy can be helpful to planners.

**9. What supplemental activities could support or enhance our current fundraising strategies?**

Given the cyclical nature of fundraising, it is important to avoid the boring repetition of doing things the same way every time. Even with something that is working well, consider where experimentation is possible. Experiment with online giving: layer a new social media strategy over a typically successful year-end appeal to try out new messaging and timing. Expand the visibility of your mission: invite event attendees to take outreach materials to their doctor’s office, church, or workplace. Boost your major gifts efforts: hand write an appeal note and mail it to your top twenty donors, along with the latest news article published about your organization.

**10. How will we lay out the work over a specific timeline?**

Frame the work across your fiscal year or business cycle. Are there points in the year that your

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organization needs more cash flow than others? Do you have to work around constraints such as workplace giving campaign blackout periods, or key personnel commitments such as an upcoming trial or planned parental leave?

Does your organization have any interesting opportunities on which to build new development efforts? Last fall, the Public Justice Center collaborated with the Homeless Persons Representation Project to host Matthew Desmond to speak about his new book *Evicted*. This helped us feature the housing crisis, our partnership, and the local work that is being done couched in the context of a book getting national attention.

#### 11. Have we built benchmarks into our timeline?

Dynamic development plans require regular check points. When we measure cumulative progress, we have a better sense of what is working and what is not. This allows us to employ contingency plans if we need a mid-cycle correction or extra boost. Quantifiable data are helpful, but so are regular narrative notes that help qualify the effectiveness of your work.

#### 12. Who is assigned to do what?

A truly effective development plan has a role for paid staff, board, volunteers and others to lend a hand. Note who will do what and pay close attention to how tasks are disbursed, making sure that each participant can handle the workload. Incorporate methods to ensure that people are clear on what they are expected to accomplish such as trainings or practice sessions for solicitors. If you are launching a new initiative or planning a major event, consider whether you have enough in-house staff or need to engage a consultant.

#### 13. What is the state of our donor list?

Does your organization have a donor database? Is the data clean and current? Do you have the expertise to use this data well? If you answer yes to all of these, you could segment a direct mail appeal or target invitations for a small event in a particular zip code. You might have the information you need to “step up” major gift solicitations.

On the other hand, if your data are not trustworthy, then you probably need to keep things very simple. It is time to prioritize data management in the development plan.

Having clean data means more than just getting salutations and addresses right on letters to donors, although this is extremely important. Good data can also provide valuable information as you seek to deepen your engagement with donors.

#### 14. What other resources do we need in order to be successful?

Your development plan should incorporate the funds needed to implement the strategies. Can you afford to try a new campaign or do you need to reduce expenses based on poor returns from the last one?

In addition to good data and volunteers equipped to succeed, necessary resources might also include strong mission-connected stories that you can tell to inspire and engage. If you dream about “someday” having a story bank, incorporate time to gather stories into the development plan.

### Section Three: Measuring Progress and Planning Next Steps

Your aim is to create a dynamic *and useful* development plan. Measuring progress not only helps demonstrate the importance of investing resources in development efforts today, but it also helps you make well-founded decisions for future development efforts.

#### 15. What are the tangible quantitative goals (basic and advanced) we want to measure? And what are the industry standards for an organization of our age, size and/or type?

There are certainly basic data points to track: how many donors did we have at the start and how many do we have at the end? How many dollars did we raise? Did we have any press coverage?

Another number that we find interesting: how many clients did our organization serve because of the funds we raised? Did we move the needle?

As your development efforts become more sophisticated, and only if your data are up to snuff, you might begin to measure trends such as lapsed versus recaptured donors, upgraded or downgraded gifts or frequency of giving.

This is the nerdy side of fundraising and some of us can get lost in the data. Avoid the temptation to analyze until the cows come home. Focus instead on acquiring the information necessary to help make informed choices for building a robust development program.

**16. What are the qualitative benefits of our success/progress?**

How do you explain the qualitative results of your efforts? This discussion can be as helpful as whether a specific program area is living up to expectations or needs to be adjusted. Are your volunteers or board members more engaged and participating in the fundraising efforts? Do more people know about your work? Did you help donors deepen their understanding of the importance of your work? Is your reputation improving?

Also consider the morale and/or burnout of staff and board. A good development plan, implemented by engaged people who are well-equipped, should reduce burnout and boost morale. This is a notable measurement given the high rates of staff turnover in nonprofit organizations, especially for fundraisers.

**17. Do we have a method for measuring progress/benchmarks on a regular basis so we can adjust our plan as needed?**

If you don't achieve a certain result but some other good came from the effort, you might decide to try it again next year if you truly understand the "why." You also need to understand why one strategy falls short and another soars beyond expectations. When plans are designed around benchmarks or guideposts, strategies can be tweaked as needed. Measurements also help us understand whether experiments with new ideas are worthwhile or not. Lastly, we think it is good practice to measure as you go.

**18. Did we meet our goals?**

At the end of the day, the purpose is to attract the resources necessary to fulfill the organization's mission. Did you meet your minimum "must raise" goals? Also consider how you might better stretch your capacity to meet or exceed those goals the next time around.

If a campaign fell short, why? Be honest and look at all sides.

**19. How have we laid the building blocks for future efforts (subsequent plans)?**

Every plan can build on the success of the previous one. Consider how people were able to improve the way they talk about the mission, attract new support, and/or try out new skills. As they became more confident, did the organization's capacity to attract and sustain funds improve? What other building blocks did you lay for future success? Now, how do you sustain this momentum?

**20. How did this development plan help the organization advance toward its strategic goals?**

Beyond the basics of raising necessary funds to implement your mission, consider how the work of the development plan advanced other strategic goals of the organization. If fundraising efforts exceeded expectations, did you increase the number of clients served? Did the mission brand get a boost with the launch of a new website? Did a strategic social media campaign result in more people becoming aware of issues that concern your organization?

**21. How did we grow the sustainability of the organization?**

Development planning goes beyond an organization's single fundraising cycle. At the Public Justice Center, our development team thinks about these questions: Did our efforts mirror our values? Did we contribute to the local/regional/national/international dialogue about justice? How did our success this year create opportunities for next year?

As we said at the outset, these are guidelines. Perhaps some of the questions are helpful and others ask for answers your organization is not yet ready to provide. Bottom line, development is not just about the numbers. Plans should reflect that this is opportunistic work and allow flexibility within a framework that encourages excellence.

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