



The Nonprofit Whisperer

THE Nonprofit
QUARTERLY

REPRINT

Matching the number of grant writers to the amount of funds an organization wishes to raise may sound logical, but it's not the way to go. Rather, a grant writer's work should be well integrated into the organization's fundraising goals, which should be developed based on past results and supported by sound fund development plans and financial management practices—in other words, by a healthy culture of philanthropy.

DEAR NONPROFIT WHISPERER,
Is there a rule of thumb or some such guideline for how many grant staff members are needed to raise a certain dollar level of just grants? I am the only person managing, writing, researching, and submitting grants, yet I'm expected to raise a certain amount (which I have never achieved, and which gets larger every year).

What kind of staffing is needed? For example, one staff member for every \$100,000 received in grants? Or, ten for every million?

Frayed

Dear Frayed,

Oh my gosh! You cannot measure grant work in such a linear way. Seasoned development folk know that the time spent on writing a grant sometimes seems in direct contradiction to the amount of money on possible offer. Thus, it is possible for a \$10,000 grant request to be more time intensive than a \$100,000 grant request.

And neither ask is likely to be very cost effective if you (or your organization) have not already struck up a relationship with the source. The Whisperer tries never to send out a grant request without having a conversation with a decision maker ahead of time, even if

that takes asking someone who has been effective with that organization to introduce me. And, actually, if you are not the executive director, that too may be hard—because, after all, many grant-makers still wish to craft that relationship with the human in charge, unless the organization has established a tradition of multiple high-level representatives.

From your letter, it sounds as if you might be working in some isolation (asked to sit in a corner and write grants). I hope you are more integrated into the whole organization, and minimally able to meet with program staff and the organization's constituents to get a real sense of the work on the ground. Your grant writing will be more authentic as a result. But to get to a sort of fundraising *flow*, you have to go yet one step further;¹ *NPQ* has recently published and provided webinars on the need to build a culture of philanthropy in nonprofits.²

A culture of philanthropy means that fundraising is not seen as an evil necessity but rather as an integrated way of life for the entire organization. Each person, from the board chair to the receptionist, has a role in the philanthropic life of the organization—not necessarily asking for money directly, but in understanding that resourcing the mission is as important as ensuring good strategy.

Within the context of a culture of philanthropy and a fund development plan, some organizations will employ grant requests to aligned foundations and government, corporate, and religious giving programs. The goal for the grants portion should be based on research done by first understanding the cost of business by program area for the organization and then projecting that cost at least one year (ideally three years) forward, and developing a plan for resourcing the costs. The grant-writing goal is further established by researching the usual and unusual grant-giving suspects for your field or in your geography, and identifying likely and possible grants within realistic ranges. And, hopefully, your organization is not asking you to “spray and pray”—sending out multiple proposals to multiple sources without benefit of researching whether or not there is a true match. Over-the-transom requests, where there has been no personal contact of any type (like a call to ensure a request might be considered) are the least likely to be funded.

We hope, for your sake, that your work is integrated with fundraising goals for each type of fundraising technique your organization uses: individual gifts, grants, events, and so forth. The goals should be developed based on past

results—in your case, in grant writing—and within the context of an overarching fund development plan that board members and other staff have been a part of creating. The fund development plan needs to be nested in organizational values, vision, and current and near-term strategies. And, it should be supported by sound financial management practices, including the ability of the organization to accurately forecast budgets beyond the current fiscal year—a critical need for the fundraising folks.

Many organizations write grants to raise money for their current financial year. Ideally, though, you are writing grants for the *projected year*—meaning, raising grant funds that will be used six to twelve months from the time the proposal is submitted. The planning process should include the organization’s management team, who help keep future programming strategically aligned with future resources—and your research should be supporting the latter part of the budget plan by establishing a *realistic* goal for all fundraising (including grants), with maybe a 5 percent increase over the previous year. (So, if you typically raise \$300,000 via grant requests, the increase is to \$315,000.) The final piece is internal capacity: there may be \$500,000 in potential gifts sitting out there, but if there is not enough “labor power” or leadership attention to organize yourself and other staff and board members to execute it, then the goal must be reduced to match staff and/or organizational capacity.

Of course, the plan will not be static and must include contingencies and time to manage new opportunities or a change in fortune and to begin the strategy-plan-request-“get”-implementation-report loop all over again simultaneously. A kind of *planned flexibility* is required to be able to forecast change and manage surprises. These might include: a new resource that appears on the horizon;

a new board president who has connections to those very-hard-to-access donor-advised funds; a foundation that changes strategy and is no longer aligned; a change in the political landscape that decreases current contracts or opens up new sources; a recession that hits and is a predictor for decreasing grants; and so forth.

If you are working for the type of organization that sidelines fundraising and puts “Baby in a corner,” or if you are working without a plan, simply churning out grants against a goal that does not seem based on a reasonable triangulation of data (again, an established cost of doing business, researched future sources of grants, and internal capacity to reach those sources), then consider looking at some other organizations that might align with your personal mission and have their act more together as regards their culture of philanthropy. Fund development staff, including grant writers, are in high demand, and you shouldn’t feel stuck in a less-than-ideal situation.

NOTES

1. I mean “flow” in the positive psychology sense of the word. See “Flow (psychology),” *Wikipedia*, updated April 13, 2018, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology)).
2. See, for example, “Fundraising Bright Spots: The Secrets of Successful Fundraising from Individuals,” *NPQ* webinar, April 18, 2017, nonprofitquarterly.org/2017/04/18/bright-spots-fundraising-secrets/.

THE NONPROFIT WHISPERER has over thirty years of experience in the nonprofit sector, serving variously as nonprofit staff and board member, foundation staff member, and nonprofit management consultant.

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