

Trouble in Paradise: Avoiding a Misstep on the Career Ladder

Ed picked up his last box of personal possessions and closed the door to the office that just a few short months ago he had opened with such a sense of excitement and possibility. He had sold his home and moved cross-country for what looked like his dream job – the top development position with an entity that sported a vibrant mission and a stable organizational and financial platform on which to build new development initiatives. But, once on board, Ed discovered that the organization was more fiscally challenged than its leadership had revealed. Worse, he discovered what he considered to be questionable financial and ethics policies. Despite the important title, the exciting mission, and the large increase in his paycheck, Ed now knew that the organization was not the right fit for him.

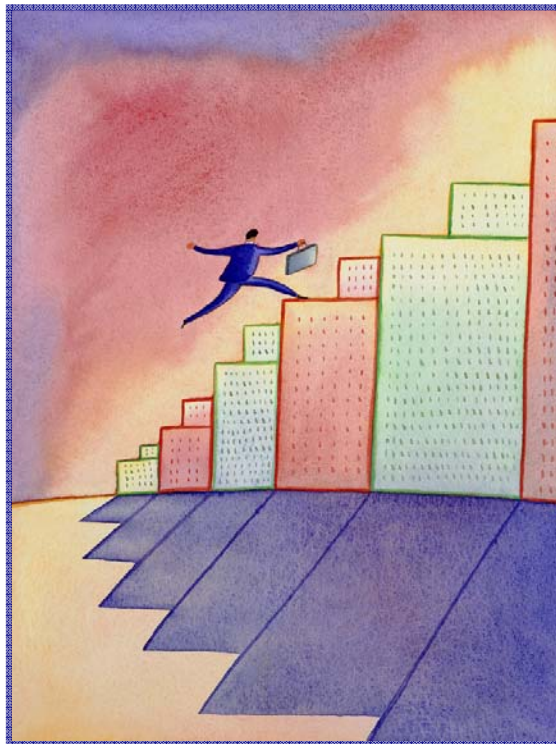
Vowing to make his next career decision with better

information, Ed submitted his resignation.

Ed's story is not unheard of. Competition among nonprofit organizations to attract and retain top development professionals remains fierce. And, while most nonprofit executives are candid with prospective employees about their organization's strengths and challenges, market

forces may tempt some to be less than forthcoming about the latter.

Interviews are not only your chance to sell your experience and advance your career, they also are the best opportunity to learn as much as possible about an organization's culture, staff, operations, and policies. Questions in six key areas will help you dig beneath the surface for information that may signal a green light—or a red flag.



1 *Does the organization develop an annual fundraising plan? If so, what roles do staff, volunteers and board members play in developing the plan? How are fundraising goals set and under what circumstances are they modified?*

Candidates for key development positions who can gain an understanding of how a nonprofit sets its financial targets stand a better chance not only of achieving these goals, but also of remaining satisfied employees, since unrealistic

expectations set by board members and volunteers are a common complaint. Determining whether time is set aside to consider and plan their development program each year and understanding how goals are set and when they may be changed can give important insights into the organization's approach to its development effort. Board members are expected to take a strong interest in the organization's financial and fundraising health, but many decisions are best left to the development professionals. Engaging board members and volunteers in planning

development efforts while utilizing the expertise of staff members is a high standard for any nonprofit. Potential new employees should be aware of – and comfortable with – the general approach to development planning.

2 *How involved is the Board of Directors? Are there rules of engagement that govern relationships between board members, donors and staff members? Have specific policies been developed to avoid conflicts of interest?*

Maintaining appropriate relationships – both business and personal – between staff and board members helps both the nonprofit and its employees navigate potentially difficult situations. At minimum, board members and staff members should be encouraged to keep their relationships focused on the work of the organization, as outside business dealings and overly-close personal relationships may be misinterpreted. Development professionals should refrain from conducting personal business with the organization’s donors or becoming so deeply enmeshed in their relationships with contributors that they lose their objectivity. Defined codes of conduct help an organization protect both its employees and board members from real or perceived improprieties. Having these policies in place indicates that the nonprofit’s leadership puts a high value on professional and ethical standards for its staff, board and donors.

3 *What is the organization’s largest source of support?*

A diversified donor portfolio is the mark of a healthy nonprofit organization and demonstrates that a strong fundraising structure is in place. Organizations that are heavily dependent on a single source for the majority of that revenue can be considered at risk. Foundation priorities may change, corporations can experience economic

difficulties and single donors who contribute the cornerstone gift to an organization every year may grow fatigued or resentful. During the interview process, development professionals should seek a breakdown of sources of funds by constituency, not just to determine if an organization is heavily dependent on a single revenue source, but also to seek out new opportunities for fundraising growth.

4 *May I meet each of the people I will supervise?*

Development professionals who will manage a staff should push for every opportunity to meet their future colleagues, ideally in one-on-one settings. Personal meetings help the candidate further evaluate staff capabilities and interpersonal “chemistry.” They also may provide opportunities for greater candor than meetings that include the executive director or other team members. Candidates should prepare questions to get a sense of the office dynamics and organizational culture. These conversations can pave the way for a smooth transition for the successful candidate and help alleviate fears and concerns among staff members who may soon be reporting to a new boss.

5 *Has your organization encountered any budget deficits in the past five years? If so, what steps were taken to address these budget shortfalls?*

A budget deficit is a true test for any nonprofit organization and its leadership. How the organization responded will give jobseekers tremendous insight into the nonprofit’s leadership and inner workings. Did the board attempt to close the financial gap? Was there a single donor who “saved the day” with a significant gift or was a special event organized to address the deficit? Were staff members or programs cut and if so, which ones? How did the organization recover and what did it learn from the experience?


Throughout their histories, many nonprofits have faced budgetary challenges and may do so again in the future. An organization's response to a serious financial challenge reveals a great deal about that organization's approach to development and its true priorities.



If there is a staff bonus plan, how is it structured? Which staff members are included? Does the program comply with the AFP Code of Ethics?

Today's competitive job market has helped make bonus and incentive programs a popular approach to help attract and retain top development professionals. Structured properly, bonuses and incentives can be important tools to reward a development professional's hard work. When applied department-wide across the board, a bonus or incentive structure can also help encourage teamwork and collaboration. However, individual commissions and percentage bonuses may have the unwanted side effect of making development professionals lose sight of an important part of their job – building future relationships for the organization. Incentive

programs that encourage fundraisers to sacrifice the long-term relationship to “make numbers” or misrepresent their organization to secure a gift – and a bonus – can do more damage than good to an organization. Bonus programs that apply only to certain staff members may foster a culture of envy and regret among the development team. While the presence of a bonus program and the possibility of an extra end of year check may be appealing, candidates should check the details, determine eligibility and ensure compliance with the AFP Code of Ethics before joining the team.

Advancement professionals are optimistic by nature. Resisting the euphoria of an exciting opportunity and asking direct—and occasionally difficult—questions may give you information you need to ensure that your next career move is the right one for you. 

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TOUGH QUESTIONS IN THE PROCESS: THE EMPLOYER'S VIEWPOINT


As a candidate, you should feel comfortable asking tough questions of a prospective employer—and expect to receive honest answers. However, remember that few organizations have “all their ducks in a row.” Most organizations want to hire professionals who are strong problem solvers and can address the challenges they are facing. The surest way to an executive position is to be someone who moves an organization to a new level of excellence and instills a desire among all employees to face obstacles and setbacks in stride.

If you sense serious issues, you should be able to ascertain in the interview process if there is a willingness to consider and implement new processes or policies to support real change. If so, will this position give you an opportunity to shine as you help your new employer meet new standards of excellence?

With regard to meeting with your prospective subordinates and/or peers, remain sensitive to an employer's decision-making process. Employers likely have determined in advance who will have a “vote” in choosing the new executive, and who will be on hand for “informational

interviews.” Expanding the process may take longer—a situation that might prove undesirable given the current high demand for talented development professionals. Well-informed employers will need to make clear to their team members and candidates alike the various roles in the decision making process.

In conclusion, both organizations and candidates should be open to discussing these tough questions, so that new hires can begin their new job with a clear understanding of challenges. But don't automatically avoid organizations who really *need* your talent and experience; helping to fix problems is the best way to career success.

A job is often like golf: the traps and the hazards are part of the game. Figure out how to overcome those obstacles—to make birdie or eagle just when it counts. 

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