

5 Ways to Thrive in Your Fundraising Career

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At the age of 12, I was convinced I was going to have a fruitful career as a world-renowned actress. I have a very clear memory of practicing my Academy Award acceptance speech in the bathroom mirror, proudly gripping a shampoo bottle as my coveted Oscar. Shockingly (or not), the universe had other plans for me—and I'm so glad it did.

The work of a fundraiser is unique, strategic and deeply personal. I've also learned our profession is often misunderstood.

How many times have you heard the phrase, "So, you just ask for money?"

There can be moments our work can feel incredibly isolating.

My 15+ year career helped me build an internal framework for growth and achievement in this industry. This personal toolkit has fortified my work as a fundraiser, staved off those feelings of isolation and solidified my long-term commitment to our sector.

I could call it a "Survival Guide," but isn't it better to prosper? Instead, let's call this my personal "Thrive Guide." Here are five personal strategies that continue to serve me well:

- **Build your community.** Fundraisers understand fundraisers. A strength comes from connecting with other like-minded professionals.

My search for community led me to my local Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) Greater Vancouver Chapter, where I've volunteered as a member of the Professional Development Committee, a mentor and, currently, a member of the Board of Directors. The additional time commitment is heavily outweighed by all I gain from the experience.

I've established relationships with peers who inspire me with their knowledge, passion and commitment. I know I could call any one of them for guidance at any time. Working alongside them has challenged me to do and be better.

- **Accept & offer mentorship.** In my opinion, this is our sector's back bone and it comes in many forms. There are those 30-year industry leaders who have seen and done it all. Then there are the change-makers new to our profession who offer an innovative and forward-thinking lens. They each have tremendous knowledge to impart.

I am grateful for mentorship from all perspectives and I reciprocate whenever possible. Mentorship can be a formal arrangement between two peers. More often than not, it's that five-minute conversation at a networking event that offers you the greatest "a-ha moments."

Just imagine what you can learn from starting a conversation with the question, "Can you tell me about your experience with...?"

- **Prioritize learning opportunities.** I have experienced the most significant professional growth in my career over the last five years. This is due, largely, to my current employer's commitment to professional development for their staff.

With their support and encouragement, I obtained my CFRE in 2019—a goal I previously believed was completely unattainable.

In our sector, it's easy to be seduced by the promise of an increase in salary or a more prominent title. However, when an employer invests in your future, it's truly transformative.

- **Uncover what fuels you.** It's absolutely vital to embrace your own passions outside of work. Fundraisers are driven. For the most part, we don't know how to operate at less than 110 percent. Couple that with the personal nature of our work and burnout can be inevitable.

When you identify your outlet beyond the office, you create a space to decompress. It allows you to set a personal priority that is just for you. And, don't be afraid to honour that boundary.

- **Leave your legacy.** Our sector constantly evolves. When faced with change, we have two options—stagnate or ride the wave. I've learned the hard way that although change is hard, when you get on board, you feel a greater sense of connection and accomplishment in your work and beyond. I want to look back and say I left things better than when I arrived for the next generation of fundraisers.

To truly leave a legacy, it's important to not only embrace change, but to boldly initiate it. This includes standing beside others who are already leading the way.

So, while I will likely never clutch that Oscar and tearfully utter those words of appreciation that I perfected as a pre-teen, I am beyond grateful for all that this amazing career has given me.

The key to my longevity in this sector has been knowing what I value and how I want to show up. Your "Thrive Guide" may look nothing like mine, but I encourage you to consider your own personal strategies for success.

Your future self will thank you.