

THE FULCRUM POINT

MORE TRUST, LESS TURF: WHY THE CEO AND CDO RELATIONSHIP DETERMINES SUCCESS

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opinion series covering
relevant and vital issues in the
nonprofit sector**

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More Trust, Less Turf:
Why the CEO and CDO Relationship Determines Nonprofit Success

The Fulcrum Point – An Opinion Article

Every nonprofit has critical leadership relationships.

The CEO and Board Chair.

The CEO and CFO.

The CEO and Program Leader.

Yet few relationships have a greater impact on organizational success than the partnership between the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Development Officer.

When this relationship thrives, fundraising accelerates, donor confidence grows, and the entire organization benefits.

When it breaks down, even talented leaders struggle to achieve their potential.

The difference often comes down to one simple principle: More trust. Less turf.

The Batman and Robin Principle

Every great superhero story has a trusted sidekick.

Batman had Robin.

The Lone Ranger had Tonto.

Sherlock Holmes had Watson.

The reason these partnerships work is not because one person is more important than the other. It is because both understand their role and trust one another completely.

The same is true in nonprofit leadership. The CEO and CDO are not competitors for influence. They are partners in advancing the mission.



The CEO is often the organization's chief visionary, chief spokesperson, and ultimate decision-maker.

The CDO is the architect of philanthropic strategy, donor engagement, and revenue growth.

Neither succeeds without the other. The strongest organizations recognize this reality and intentionally build a partnership grounded in collaboration rather than territorialism.

The Cost of Turf Wars

Unfortunately, not every CEO-CDO relationship reflects this ideal. Sometimes CEOs become overly protective of donor relationships, unwilling to share access or authority. Sometimes development leaders guard information, strategies, or relationships as if they are personal assets rather than organizational resources. Sometimes both parties operate from insecurity rather than confidence.

The result is predictable. Mixed messages reach donors. Important opportunities are missed. Internal frustrations grow. Staff members choose sides. Momentum slows. The mission suffers.

Donors can sense organizational dysfunction far faster than leaders often realize.

When trust is absent inside the organization, confidence begins to erode outside the organization as well.

Fundraising Is a Team Sport

One of the most damaging misconceptions in nonprofit leadership is the belief that fundraising belongs exclusively to the development department. It doesn't. Fundraising belongs to the entire organization.

The CEO plays a critical role.

The Board plays a critical role.

Program leaders play a critical role.



Volunteers play a critical role.

The development team coordinates and facilitates those efforts. When CEOs and CDOs understand this reality, fundraising becomes less about ownership and more about partnership.

The question shifts from: "Whose donor is this?" To: "How do we best serve this donor together?" That shift changes everything.

Trust Creates Speed

Organizations often underestimate how much trust accelerates performance. When a CEO fully trusts a CDO, decisions happen faster.

Donor strategies become more sophisticated.

Staff members gain confidence.

Opportunities move forward without unnecessary delays.

Likewise, when a CDO trusts a CEO, communication improves. Difficult conversations happen sooner. Potential problems surface before becoming crises. Both leaders become more aligned in their priorities and actions. Trust eliminates friction. And friction is often the hidden enemy of fundraising growth.

The Best Partnerships Share the Credit

One characteristic consistently appears in high-performing CEO-CDO relationships. Neither person needs to be the hero.

The CEO celebrates the development team's successes.

The CDO elevates the CEO's leadership and visibility.

Wins are shared. Failures are addressed together. Credit is distributed generously. Egos remain secondary to outcomes.

This mindset creates an environment where collaboration flourishes. It also creates something donors find incredibly attractive: organizational unity.



Donors want confidence that the people leading the mission are aligned.

Nothing communicates confidence more effectively than leaders who genuinely trust one another.

What Great CEOs Do

Exceptional CEOs understand that philanthropy is too important to delegate completely and too complex to control personally. They remain engaged. They participate in donor cultivation. They make strategic introductions. They help articulate vision. They show up when needed. Most importantly, they empower their development leaders to lead. They understand that hiring a talented CDO means trusting that individual to do what they were hired to do.

What Great CDOs Do

Exceptional development leaders understand that fundraising ultimately serves the mission, not their department. They communicate proactively. They prepare their CEOs thoroughly. They make leadership look good. They provide honest counsel. They create systems and strategies that strengthen the entire organization. Most importantly, they recognize that their success is tied directly to the success of the CEO.

The strongest CDOs are not trying to become the CEO. They are helping the CEO succeed.

A Shared Commitment to Mission

At its best, the CEO-CDO relationship is not built around hierarchy. It is built around shared commitment. Both leaders wake up every morning focused on the same objective:

Advancing the mission.

Serving more people.

Creating greater impact.

Generating the resources necessary to achieve that vision.



When trust replaces suspicion and collaboration replaces turf protection, extraordinary things become possible. Organizations raise more money. Donors become more engaged. Teams become more unified. Communities receive greater benefit. The mission moves forward.

The nonprofit sector does not need more turf wars. It needs more Batman and Robin partnerships. More trust. Less turf. Because when CEOs and CDOs truly work together, everyone wins.

For more information about Fulcrum Nonprofit Leadership, please visit our website at www.fulcrumleader.com or reach out to us directly via email at hello@fulcrumleader.com.