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The Belief That Makes or Breaks a Fundraiser

Under the Elm • Discussion 10

1. The Problem Hidden Inside High-Performing Development Teams

Most executive directors looking at a struggling development program reach for the same explanations. The fundraiser needs better training. The portfolio is too large. The donor base is weak. These diagnoses feel logical. They are almost always incomplete.

The deeper problem is rarely about skill. It is about belief. Specifically, a fundraiser's belief that their effort will produce results. Researchers call this self-efficacy. When it erodes, everything else erodes with it. Call attempts drop. Proposals become thinner. Portfolio conversations grow shorter. The fundraiser who once drove revenue becomes the one you are managing out of a performance improvement plan.

The expensive part is not the exit. The expensive part is the twelve to eighteen months before the exit, when a high-performing fundraiser operates at a fraction of their capacity because no one named the actual problem.

> *"The twelve months before a good fundraiser quits are more costly than the recruitment expense that follows. We just do not track them that way."*

2. What Self-Efficacy Is and What It Is Not

Self-efficacy is not confidence in the casual sense. It is not optimism. It is not resilience. It is a specific belief: the belief that a person's actions in a defined domain will produce the outcomes those actions are designed to produce.

In fundraising, self-efficacy shows up as the belief that a well-cultivated major gift ask will be received well, that a sustained stewardship plan will reduce attrition, that a relationship-building strategy will open a corporate partnership. When a fundraiser believes these things, they invest effort in them. When they stop believing, they stop investing.

The Withdrawal Pattern: The withdrawal pattern begins subtly. A fundraiser who was proactive in scheduling donor meetings starts waiting for donors to reach out. Portfolio records become less detailed. Calls get shorter. Then the fundraiser stops attending optional cultivation events. Then they stop making the hard calls. Then they give notice. The pattern is consistent. It is rarely recognized until the exit interview, which is far too late.

3. What Causes Self-Efficacy to Erode

Self-efficacy erodes in three conditions: when effort does not produce visible outcomes; when an organization gives a fundraiser responsibility without authority; and when a fundraiser operates in isolation without professional feedback that tells them whether their instincts are right.

Each of these conditions exists in the average nonprofit development operation. The major gift fundraiser who works an 18-month cultivation cycle with no feedback until the ask either succeeds or fails is working in precisely the environment most likely to erode belief. The development officer who identifies a promising corporate prospect but cannot get internal leadership to engage with the pitch is in exactly the structural trap that drains self-efficacy over time.

The fix is not inspiration. It is organizational. And it starts with the leader naming the problem.

> *"Self-efficacy does not evaporate overnight. It drains slowly, through a hundred small moments where effort produced nothing visible."*

4. What to Do This Quarter

- Conduct one-on-one conversations with each member of your development team specifically designed to surface their belief about whether their effort is producing results.
- Review your portfolio management process for feedback gaps: are fundraisers completing major gift cultivation cycles without meaningful input from leadership?
- Identify one fundraiser on your team who has gone quiet in the last 90 days and schedule a structured conversation before they move further into the withdrawal pattern.
- Assess whether your development staff have both the responsibility and the authority to move their portfolios forward without waiting for organizational action.
- Review your last three development team meetings: were early-stage wins and effort celebrated, or was attention focused only on closed gifts?

5. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

The belief a fundraiser brings to their portfolio on any given morning is not fixed. It was built by experience. It is sustained by feedback. It is eroded by conditions your organization has the ability to change.

The fundraisers who are quietly withdrawing from your team are not weak. They are responding rationally to an environment that has stopped confirming their work matters. Find them before they find the door.

> **Field Note:** *A community hospital with a three-person development team noticed their mid-level gift officer had stopped proactively prospecting over a six-month period. Portfolio records showed declining call volume and shorter meeting notes. The executive director assumed burnout. A structured conversation revealed the fundraiser had completed seventeen cultivation visits over two years without a single closing conversation because leadership had not made a major gift case available for use with donors. Once the case was built and the fundraiser was authorized to use it, cultivation activity returned to previous levels within sixty days. No attrition. No recruitment cost. One naming conversation.*