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The Executive Director Who Has Made Themselves the Bottleneck in Development

Under the Elm • Discussion 14

1. Five Forms the Bottleneck Takes

An executive director whose personal relationship management is the primary driver of major gift revenue has made themselves the ceiling of the development program. The program produces what the executive director can personally manage, and no more. When they leave, the program faces a crisis.

Form One: All Major Donor Relationships Held Personally

The executive director has personally built major donor relationships over the years, and the donors give in significant part because of their confidence in this specific person. This is a genuine organizational asset and a genuine organizational vulnerability. A development program whose major gift potential is concentrated in the executive director's personal relationship portfolio cannot scale beyond the executive director's available relationship time. And it cannot survive a leadership transition without significant revenue disruption. The relationships are real. The vulnerability is also real.

Form Two: Executive Director Must Be Present for Every Significant Interaction

The development director cannot schedule a major gift cultivation visit, send a proposal, conduct a stewardship call, or close a significant gift without the executive director present or involved. This feels like leadership accountability. It functions as a capacity constraint. The development program can only execute as many major gift moves as the executive director has time to participate in, which, in most organizations, is fewer than the cultivation pipeline

requires.

Form Three: Development Decisions Require Executive Director Approval at Every Stage

Cultivation strategies, ask amounts, gift proposals, and stewardship letters all require executive director review before proceeding. None of these approval requirements is unreasonable in isolation. Together, they create a development program that moves at the speed of the executive director's review queue — which is typically slower than the donor relationship requires and significantly slower than a development program with appropriate decision-making authority could produce.

Form Four: Donor Relationship Knowledge Not Transferred to the Development Team

The executive director knows things about major donors that the development team does not: personal history, family dynamics, prior conversations, giving motivations, professional relationships, philanthropic values. When this knowledge is not documented and transferred, it creates a dependency that limits the development program's ability to function in the executive director's absence, continue cultivation between executive director visits, or prepare intelligently for donor interactions the development director is managing.

Form Five: The Development Director Has Learned Not to Push

The bottleneck has persisted long enough that the development director has adapted — not by resolving it, but by lowering their ambitions to match what the executive director's available time can support. They no longer make the case for cultivation moves that require executive director bandwidth, because they have learned those moves will not happen at the required pace. They manage a portfolio sized to what they can execute without the executive director. The program is not failing. It is producing what it is designed to produce, but at a fraction of what the organization's donor base could support.

2. Why Executive Directors Become Bottlenecks

The Relationships Were Genuinely Built by the Executive Director

In founder-led organizations and those where the current executive director has been in the role for many years, the major donor relationships were genuinely developed through the executive director's personal investment. The protective instinct about those relationships is not misplaced. The issue is whether the executive director's personal holding of them is the only viable path or whether the relationships can be expanded, without diminishing the personal element, to include the development team as supporting relationship partners who extend reach rather than replace the role.

The Executive Director Does Not Fully Trust the Development Team

Some bottlenecks reflect a genuine, sometimes justified confidence gap. The development director is newer, their major gift experience is more limited, or they have made errors in prior donor interactions that made the executive director cautious. This requires a different response: not transfer of relationship authority, but deliberate investment in development team capacity with the executive director in an active coaching role and a defined timeline within which the development director will be expected to manage a defined set of relationships independently.

The Calendar Has Never Been Explicitly Structured Around Development

Many executive directors become development bottlenecks not through deliberate choice but through the natural prioritization of the most urgent demands on their time. Program crises, board dynamics, staff management, and operational demands consistently displace development work, which feels less urgent in any given week, even though it is more important over the long term. This reason is structural and addressable: when the executive director's calendar is explicitly protected for development work — with major gift cultivation visits treated as non-negotiable commitments — the bottleneck often resolves without any change to

organizational roles.

3. Five Interventions That Resolve the Bottleneck

The executive director who has built a development program with a capable director, documented relationship knowledge, defined decision-making authority, and trained board relationship partners has made themselves the foundation of the development program, not its ceiling. Their personal relationships are the most significant in the portfolio, but they are supported by an organizational infrastructure that extends their reach and persists beyond their personal tenure.

Intervention One: Document and Transfer Relationship Knowledge

Systematic documentation of major donor relationship knowledge into a shared organizational record: giving history, personal connection to the mission, significant prior conversations, family situation as it relates to philanthropy, other charitable commitments, specific sensitivities or preferences. Approximately 2–4 hours of focused executive director attention per donor. For a portfolio of 15–25 major donors, this is a 30–60 hour investment that produces a qualitative transformation in the development team's ability to manage those relationships intelligently in the executive director's absence.

Intervention Two: Restructure the Calendar Around Development Priorities

Working with the development director, identify the specific number of major gift cultivation visits, stewardship calls, and development-focused events the major gift portfolio requires per quarter and block that time before any other demand is scheduled. Literally: 4–6 major gift cultivation visits per quarter, scheduled 3 months in advance, treated as non-negotiable. This is not a small change. It requires genuinely saying no to other demands. But it is the structural intervention that most directly resolves the bottleneck.

Intervention Three: Define the Development Director's Decision-Making Authority

A clear, documented framework: what development decisions the development director can make independently; what decisions require executive director consultation; what decisions require executive director approval. A reasonable framework: development director independently manages cultivation and stewardship for donors up to \$25,000–\$50,000; donors above that threshold require consultation before major moves; gift proposals at all major gift levels require review within a defined 48-hour turnaround; gift agreements require executive director signature. The specific thresholds vary by organization and by the development director's experience. What matters is that they exist, are explicit, and are honored.

Intervention Four: Develop the Development Director's Relationship Authority Deliberately

For organizations where the bottleneck reflects a genuine confidence gap, a deliberate capacity-building plan with the executive director in an active coaching role. The executive director and development director attend major gift meetings together for the first 2–3 interactions with a prospect, with the development director taking an increasing share of conversational responsibility in each subsequent visit. Structured debrief after each interaction. A defined 12–18 month timeline within which the development director will manage a defined set of major donor relationships independently.

Intervention Five: Introduce Board Members as Relationship Co-Investors

Board members with genuine personal connections to major donor prospects, briefed on the cultivation strategy and the donor's interests, participating in 2–3 cultivation interactions per year, extend the organization's relationship reach without requiring the executive director's direct presence. Board members in this role are not replacing the executive director in the relationship; they are supplementing it, creating additional touchpoints, and maintaining cultivation momentum between executive director interactions. When working well, the executive director's cultivation interactions are supported and amplified rather than constrained.

4. The Conversation the Executive Director Needs to Have

The question is not whether your major donor relationships are valuable. They are. The question is not whether your involvement in major gift fundraising is important. It is. The question is whether the way your involvement is currently structured produces the most fundraising value for the organization, or whether it produces value for some relationships at the cost of capacity for others.

The most important thing an executive director can do for their organization's fundraising is not to make every major donor call personally. It is to build the development infrastructure that enables the organization to make more calls to more donors, with greater consistency, and with greater organizational confidence than any single leader's personal relationships can support.

Every executive director will eventually leave their role. An executive director who has built a development program that is genuinely organizational with documented relationship knowledge, capable staff, board relationship partners, and a donor base that gives to the mission and not only to the person has made one of the most important leadership contributions available. The relationships that were genuinely personal are now genuinely institutional.

The executive director who has made themselves the bottleneck has not failed. They have succeeded so thoroughly at building personal relationships that the organization has not built anything else of comparable quality. The work now is to build that something else, not instead of the relationships, but alongside them and in support of them.

5. Next Step Actions

- Conduct an honest bottleneck self-assessment: map every major gift cultivation move planned for the next 90 days and identify which ones require executive director involvement. Is

the pace of those moves appropriate for the donor relationships, or is it constrained by the executive director's availability?

- Begin the relationship knowledge transfer: choose three major donors and spend 60–90 minutes documenting the relationship intelligence the development team needs to manage each relationship intelligently; establish a quarterly cadence for completing the full portfolio.
- Review the executive director's calendar for the next 90 days: identify the major gift cultivation visits that should be scheduled; schedule them as non-negotiable commitments; note what must move to make that scheduling possible.
- Draft a development decision-making authority framework with the development director: define what decisions they can make independently, what requires consultation, what requires approval, and what turnaround commitment the executive director will make for required reviews.
- Identify two board members who have genuine personal connections to major donor prospects and brief them on a specific cultivation role regarding: the specific donor, the specific cultivation objective, and the specific interactions they could facilitate in the next quarter.
- Have an explicit conversation with the development director about the bottleneck: acknowledge the pattern directly, name what you are committing to change, and ask what they need from you to manage major gift relationships more independently

6. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

Your personal relationships with major donors are an extraordinary asset. They are also, when they are the primary mechanism of fundraising rather than the most important element of a larger system, a limitation. Not because they aren't valuable. Because they are finite. And the mission you are leading isn't.

The shift from development ceiling to development foundation does not diminish the executive director's role. It expands the organization's capacity to benefit from it. Document the relationships. Structure the calendar. Define the authority. Support the development director and cultivate the board partners.

Then watch what the organization can accomplish when major gift fundraising is not limited by any single person's available hours, including yours.

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