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# What Separates the Fundraiser Who Thrives from the One Who Leaves

*Under the Elm • Discussion 13*

## 1. Two Fundraisers, Same Resources, Opposite Results

Take two development officers at the same organization, same portfolio size, same donor base, same access to leadership, same budget. One is your strongest performer. The other is twelve months from giving notice. From the outside, the conditions are identical. The difference is internal, and it is measurable.

The high-agency fundraiser believes their decisions, their relationships, and their strategies are the primary drivers of portfolio performance. The low-agency fundraiser believes organizational conditions, donor behavior, and timing are the primary drivers. Both of these beliefs produce behavior that makes them true. The high-agency fundraiser acts, adjusts, and re-engages. The low-agency fundraiser waits, rationalizes, and withdraws.

This is not a character observation. It is a systems observation. The high-agency fundraiser was, in most cases, built by an organization that understood how to build agency. The low-agency fundraiser was shaped by an organization that eroded it.

*“The fundraiser who believes their effort matters raises more money. The fundraiser who believes the organization’s conditions determine their results is already on their way out.”*

## 2. High Agency at Three Levels

**At the Individual Level:** The high-agency fundraiser maintains a prospecting habit independent of organizational pipeline pressures. They document portfolio relationships with enough specificity to resume any cultivation conversation immediately after a gap. They ask for feedback rather than waiting for it. They make cultivation decisions within their authority without delay. They recover from a failed ask by analyzing what happened rather than withdrawing from the process.

**At the Team Level:** High-agency teams share intelligence. A cultivation insight gained by one gift officer becomes a shared resource within the team. Failed strategies are debriefed, not hidden. Senior staff actively coach junior staff, not because it is required but because the team culture connects individual performance to collective outcome. High-agency teams disagree openly about strategy because they believe their analysis matters.

**At the Organizational Level:** Organizations with high development agency have visible, documented pathways from donor identification to major gift close. They have boards that function as partners in cultivation, not as passive observers. They have leadership that treats development staff as strategic contributors. They have data systems that make pipeline activity visible to everyone who needs to see it. They have cultures that celebrate effort alongside outcome.

## 3. The Turnover Cost Argument

The business case for building high-agency development culture is not primarily about retention. It is about revenue. An organization that retains a gift officer for six years instead of two does not simply avoid recruitment costs. It builds a compounding portfolio of donor relationships that grows in value with each year of uninterrupted cultivation.

The gift officer who stays for six years and maintains their agency through that tenure will close gifts the two-year gift officer never got close enough to identify. The donor who takes three years to move from first cultivation conversation to major gift commitment never converts in organizations where the development officer turns over annually. These are not recoverable losses. They are permanently forgone revenue.

The math is straightforward. A single major gift at \$250,000, a reasonable threshold for an experienced gift officer's portfolio, represents a return on retention investment that covers multiple years of salary, benefits, and supervision time. The organization that views development staff retention as a human resources concern rather than a revenue strategy is leaving the largest line of its budget to chance.

*"The donor who needs three years of cultivation before they are ready to make a transformational gift is not in your pipeline if your development officer turned over in year two. That is not a bad luck story. That is a retention story."*

#### 4. What to Do This Quarter

- Assess each member of your development team on the three individual-level high-agency indicators: prospecting independence, documentation quality, and feedback-seeking behavior.
- Review your last six months of development team meetings for the ratio of strategy discussion to status reporting. High-agency teams spend more time on strategy.
- Calculate the real cost of your last development staff departure: recruitment, onboarding, portfolio disruption, and lost cultivation continuity. Share the number with your board.
- Identify the three major gift prospects in your current pipeline most dependent on relationship continuity with a specific gift officer. Assess the risk if that officer departs.
- Conduct a board engagement audit: in the last twelve months, how many board members actively participated in a donor cultivation or stewardship activity?

#### 5. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

The high-agency fundraiser you are trying to hire already exists. In many cases, they are already in your organization, waiting for the environment that will let them operate at full capacity.

The work of the forward-looking leader is not recruitment. It is design. Build the structures, the feedback systems, the authority pathways, and the leadership practices that give belief somewhere to grow. The fundraisers will do the rest.

**Field Note:** *A regional arts organization with a twelve-person development staff implemented a high-agency culture initiative after tracking three consecutive years of flat major gift revenue despite strong board relationships and a loyal donor base. The initiative included a monthly peer debrief structure, a redesigned portfolio management system that made cultivation milestones visible to senior leadership, and a quarterly board activation calendar that assigned each board member to two specific donor relationships. In the two years following implementation, major gift revenue increased 31 percent, average tenure on the development team rose from 2.1 years to 4.4 years, and the organization closed two gifts above \$500,000, neither of which had been in active cultivation before the initiative.*