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Four Ways to Rebuild What Erosion Has Taken

Under the Elm • Discussion 12

1. Belief Is Not Fixed

The most important thing to understand about self-efficacy is that it is not a personality trait. It is not fixed at hire. It is not determined by experience level or credential. It is a dynamic state, built and rebuilt continuously through four specific mechanisms that Albert Bandura identified through four decades of research and that translate with precision to nonprofit development work.

This matters because it changes the intervention. If self-efficacy were fixed, the leadership response to an eroding fundraiser would be replacement. Since it is not fixed, the response is deliberate reconstruction. And the leaders who understand the four levers are the ones who retain talent their competitors are cycling through.

“Self-efficacy is not personality. It is architecture. You built the conditions that damaged it. You can build the conditions that restore it.”

2. The Four Levers

Mastery Experiences: The most powerful driver of self-efficacy is direct experience of success. Not outcome success alone but milestone success at every stage of a fundraising process. The fundraiser who successfully moves a donor from first cultivation conversation to second meeting, who receives positive engagement at a cultivation event, who delivers an impact report and sees a donor’s response shift: each of these experiences deposits into the belief account. Leaders who design development processes with visible, achievable milestones build self-efficacy systematically. Leaders who focus only on closed gifts make every fundraiser work inside a feedback desert.

Vicarious Learning: The second lever is observational: what a fundraiser watches experienced colleagues do. This is why development team culture matters beyond the interpersonal. When a senior gift officer conducts a donor visit and debrief with a junior colleague, both skill and belief transfer. When a team practices difficult conversations together, when a manager talks through a successful strategy that failed and explains what they would do differently, the team's collective self-efficacy rises. The organization that operates development in silos deprives its team of one of the four inputs self-efficacy requires.

Verbal Encouragement: The third lever is more nuanced than it sounds. Encouragement that is generic or disconnected from specific effort has minimal effect. Encouragement that names specific behavior and connects it to the outcome it is designed to produce has measurable impact. The executive director who tells a major gift officer "that listening conversation you had with the Hendersons was exactly right" is doing something different from the one who says "great work this week." The specificity is the mechanism. Leaders who develop the habit of specific, effort-focused feedback are building self-efficacy deliberately.

Physiological State: The fourth lever is the one most often overlooked in professional development contexts. A fundraiser who is exhausted, emotionally depleted, or operating under sustained stress experiences these physical states as confirmation they are not capable of the work. Organizations that treat fundraiser wellbeing as a policy issue rather than a performance issue are operating the fourth lever without knowing it. Leaders who build sustainable pace, acknowledge emotional load, and normalize recovery are building self-efficacy. Leaders who normalize exhaustion as dedication are destroying it.

3. A Ninety-Day Mastery Sequence

The fastest path to self-efficacy restoration for an eroding fundraiser is a structured ninety-day mastery sequence built on the first lever: designed, visible, achievable wins. The sequence does not require new donors, new resources, or new programs. It requires leadership attention to milestone design.

The sequence has three phases. In the first thirty days, the goal is activity restoration: increase call and visit volume by removing the structural barriers suppressing it. In the second thirty days, the goal is milestone celebration: leadership deliberately names

and acknowledges each cultivation stage completion, regardless of whether it produced a gift. In the final thirty days, the goal is contribution connection: the fundraiser's activity is tied explicitly to organizational outcomes, mission delivery, and team impact.

Most organizations run this sequence in reverse. They focus on outcomes first, activity second, and rarely connect either to the fundraiser's sense of contribution. The reversal is the intervention.

"The ninety-day sequence does not require new donors. It requires leaders who know what to look for and the discipline to name it when they see it."

4. What to Do This Quarter

- Map your current development process and identify every point where a fundraiser receives visible confirmation their effort produced a result. If you find fewer than three, your process is running on a deficit.
- Schedule one peer learning conversation per month between your most experienced gift officer and one junior staff member, with a structured debrief format.
- Replace three generic acknowledgments this month with specific, effort-focused feedback that names the exact behavior and connects it to a cultivation or retention outcome.
- Assess your development team's current workload for the physiological self-efficacy drain: are they working at a sustainable pace, or are they in an exhaustion-as-dedication culture?
- Identify one fundraiser currently in early-stage portfolio development and design a visible thirty-day mastery sequence with three specific milestone moments built in.

5. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

The four levers are not new management theory. They are the mechanics of belief, documented across decades of research and applicable with precision to the work your development team does every day.

The fundraiser you are about to lose probably still has the capacity for the role. What they may have lost is the belief their capacity matters in your organization. The levers that built that belief are still available to you. The question is whether you will use them before or after their resignation letter.

Field Note: *A faith-based hospital foundation with a six-person development team implemented a structured peer learning program after losing three mid-level gift officers in fourteen months. The program paired each early-career staff member with a senior gift officer for one joint donor visit per month, followed by a structured debrief. Within six months, call volume across the team increased by 22 percent, gift officers reported higher confidence in cultivation conversations, and the foundation retained every development staff member through the following annual review cycle, the first time in four years without a mid-year departure.*