

AGENT PROVOCATEUR

Old perceptions of fundraisers as a necessary evil are still holding back top fundraisers from being considered for chief executive roles. But **JACKIE MENDOZA** says fundraisers have a lot to offer

As a fundraiser who had worked at director level for a number of years, the question ‘what should my next move be?’ would pop up from time to time in my head. The options were quite straightforward: deputy chief executive or chief executive; switching over to another director role at a larger charity; or going freelance as a consultant.

When considering the chief executive option, I’d always grind to a halt when trying to think of other fundraisers who’d trodden that path before me. The only high-profile fundraiser-turned-chief executive I knew of at the time was the late Gill Astarita. Other senior, female fundraisers I respected had expressed an interest in the chief executive role but had never made it. In the end, I opted for the consultancy route.

Two years on, I find myself as the new executive director of Rosa, the first UK-wide Fund for women and girls. And, although I’m there myself, I’m still asking the question: why aren’t there more fundraisers and marketers in the chief executive role?

I took the question to peers, friends and, naturally, to Twitter.

Some answered that there aren’t enough senior fundraisers putting themselves forward for the CEO role. One suggested this may not be happening because having to deal with politics at the top often ruins

good marketers and fundraisers. We much prefer to concentrate on ideas, targets and the bottom line after all.

But despite our obsession with achieving targets, one suggestion was that we don’t do a good enough job of convincing boards of the worth and impact of our results and so a finance director, for example, will be more likely to get the top job than a fundraising or marketing director.

In this current risk-averse climate, this is certainly more likely to be true. If there aren’t many precedents of fundraisers and marketers successfully moving into chief executive roles, then boards are less likely to want to take the risk.

And if fundraisers ever do make it to the top, it’s often those from a corporate fundraising or major donor background who do, as opposed to the (more modest?) direct marketers.

The main issue lies in how fundraising and marketing continue to be perceived in many organisations. Like it or not, they are still often regarded as necessary evils and the poorer relations of service provision.

To me, both the challenges and opportunities of being a fundraiser/marketer-turned-chief executive stem from the same issue above. One of the challenges for a target-oriented fundraiser-turned-chief executive is in leading diverse elements of an

organisation which may not be used to working so strictly to the deadlines and KPIs that are part and parcel of a fundraiser’s routine. At the same time, having to think about the organisation as a whole can be all-consuming, leaving little time to focus on the fundraising and marketing activity that energises us.

That said, the opportunities for a fundraiser or marketer are truly attractive. The basic tenets that we abide by for good supporter and donor care will deliver equal and valuable benefits to our beneficiaries as well.

The board of an organisation will only appoint a fundraiser chief executive when they perceive a real need for fundraising and marketing to drive their organisation forward. Perhaps it’s the smaller and more entrepreneurial organisations that are ready and willing to take the ‘risk’ of appointing a fundraiser or marketer to chief executive. Again, because the need is there.

And so we come back full circle. It’s down to every one of us to continue championing the real value of fundraising and marketing and to continue setting those precedents. And as for the top job, it’s not as daunting as it sounds – but ask me again in a year or two. ■



Jackie Mendoza is the executive director of the Rosa Fund

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