

The integral role senior leaders play in the success of a development office

Written by Andy Wood, Managing-Director of Graham-Pelton Consulting, sponsors of the Heads, Bursars and Governors stream at the IDPE 2018 Annual Conference

Twenty years ago, 'development' was a word rarely heard in the corridors, or studies, of independent schools. Schools did run fundraising campaigns in the last millennium, but few schools, if any, would have had a permanent development office or a long-term plan. So, in a sector where the brand leaders have been in control for four or five centuries, development is still in its infancy, or at least a new kid in town.

So, in the midst of everything else that has happened in schools in the last two decades – in syllabus and safe-guarding, in facilities and fees – the growth of development and fundraising has been one of the most important, well, *developments*. And yet, there still exist two very different narratives about the importance, the value, and the success of development. On the one hand, for some schools, the funds generated have been completely transformational, if not lifesaving. If those funds have been spent on major capital projects, they have enabled schools to offer world-class facilities, particularly in sport and the performing arts, which have massively enriched the pupils' experiences and enabled schools to offer the excellence and breadth of education which all Heads sing about in their website welcomes. If those funds have been spent on the provision of bursaries and the broadening of a school's intake, they have brought schools much closer to their historic, moral, and educational purposes and to their communities. They have often restored academic standards and answered the concerns of the political and charitable world.

On the other hand, the experience of many schools, Heads, Governors, and Development Directors has not been so cheerful or clear-cut. Too often there has been uncertainty about too many things. What to do, and how to do it? What counts as success, and how long do we have to wait? Who's in charge, and how much of the Head's time does it really take? And the stories of disappointment, ambivalence, and even failure don't exactly encourage others to stride forth with courage into this newfound land of development.

However, whatever the teething troubles of this infant, development is going to be vital to every school's strategy in the next decade and beyond. After all, when development is done well, it brings with it three major benefits of a very different kind. The first is the most obvious: financial. Development can – and does – bring in funds that are of real significance in the context of a school. Schools cannot keep on pushing up fees, especially in the straitened circumstances of the Midlands and the North. Nor can they find rapid extra 'profits' from massive expansion or cost-cutting. There is no 'magic money tree', to quote the PM, unless schools think they can find such a thing overseas. Successful fundraising can, and does, make a big difference to the vast majority of schools. The

second is numerical: Development is the mighty handmaiden of recruitment, the word that echoes most in the minds of sleepless Heads. Fundraising either brings facilities that attract more and better pupils or, in the case of bursaries, it funds more and better pupils. Which Head would not be glad to have a dozen more bright candidates guaranteed to come? The third is more spiritual than financial (or numerical). A strong development office brings everyone in the school together – pupils, parents, and alumni – into a real sense of community and shared purpose. Development isn't about sending out brochures and donation forms, but it is about making everyone feel part of an institution that has done good and can do even more.

However, if development is going to fulfil these functions, schools must understand and enact that centrality: it cannot be a sideshow or a gesture, nor can it be the sole responsibility of a development office up some backstairs. Development and fundraising will work if, and only if, the school is willing to set in place four key elements, four pillars to hold up the edifice. And if you don't set up all four, the edifice collapses. The first of those pillars is leadership: the Head and the Governors have to decide what they want to do and be totally committed to that purpose. The second is clarity: everyone needs to know what the school wants to do, why it wants to do it, and that what it wants to do really matters. The third is community: Governors, staff, alumni, and parents need to feel engaged in something that matters. Only then will they want to contribute and will be thrilled to do so. The fourth is commitment: the school has to commit time, money, staff, energy, and thought to the plan, and that commitment cannot have short horizons or timescales. After all, successful development, despite its relative youth, has already had major, perhaps historic, impact on many schools.