

## AADO Meet the Expert - **Tony Spearman-Leach**

*Interviewed by Juanita Sheppard 12/1/2020*

### **What was your first fundraising job, and what did it teach you?**

My first fundraising position was in political fundraising. I was very fortunate to be brought in by Governor John Engler and Senator Spencer Abraham into Michigan politics. I have no idea I would be expected to connect with the community and raise money. My first project was the Governor's Annual Gala, and I was responsible for selling an allotment of tickets within southern Michigan. I learned that what was most important was reaching out to people and explaining to them where the money would bolster the public policy agenda. I also learned the importance of contact in a relationship. You may not have responded to the phone call, but you responded to the mail. You may not have responded to the mail, but you responded to my meeting invite. You learn that everybody has a different means of accessing them that fits their comfortability level. Nothing is truer than to meet people where they are and not where you want them to be. I learned the art of listening to people as they told me where they wanted to be met so that I could walk the journey with them.

My next more traditional fundraising job was at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, where I served as the Chief Communications and Chief Development Officer. Juanita Moore was the President at the time. Our board included some of the top national African American leaders, and failure was not an option, so I quickly learned a few things. There is a need to innovate, even when engaging with diverse donors. In developing a strategy for building our donor database in the context of Michigan laws, we were able to gain access to voter rolls (names, addresses, and phone numbers). In doing so, we were able to match where the most active voters were and match them against our most active donors' zip codes. Through this experience, the insight learned was that if people are civically engaged, they are most likely to be philanthropically engaged. The second lesson learned is that we often focus on our immediate needs, but we don't think about keeping our donors excited enough that they want to be continuously engaged. It would do us well to understand how we can bring the donors to us to make them feel at home. Are we still relevant to our donors? We want donors to be a part *of* us, not a donor *to* us. There's something you need that the donors can help lend problem-solving solutions through their experiences and expertise. Our donors want to be heroes! They get enough depressing mail and news at home. Our donors cannot control everything in their lives, but they can control where they put their money to be a hero.

### **What is your advice to our colleagues who are second-guessing their ability to make that next great leap in their career and shy away from the promotion spotlight?**

I was very fortunate early in my career in realizing that I needed to hone certain skills that I didn't have. I chose to engage by joining boards that focused on areas I had a passion for or have impacted my life, my community, or my family. I would really urge young development professionals to consider engaging in board activity. It will assist them in developing relationships for C-Suite relationships and negotiations. Don't doubt your capacity. Don't doubt your capacity to learn. A good leader is continually learning as they execute the process. So,

don't feel that you have to have 100% of the ideal skill set. Most people write their job descriptions as an ideal. They then interview you, and they ask themselves three questions -- How many of the ideal attributes can you check off, how much of it could you possibly attain, and how fast can you attain the necessary knowledge to get the job done. What we tend to do is we doubt ourselves off the gate, which really what we're saying to ourselves is, we are diminishing our capacity to learn, we are diminishing our capacity to attain.

Through my board experiences, I learned that there are people out there who will groom you in the process. Part of the process of going after higher positions is to grow your network, growing the fabric of who you are, as friends, as professional colleagues, as mentors. And that's what joining the boards actually gave me a chance to do.

The most important thing to remember is to go after what gives you the most joy. You know, I tell people that no job will make you happy every day. There is no perfect, so make sure that you come out feeling that you accomplish something at the end of that week when you go into that position. And at the end of that, make sure that the milestones that are personally important to you have been touched upon.

As you build up your skills, make sure you develop a list of skills you need to learn, so you can check them off as you progress. Even as you take on a new position, know that you will always be learning -- your nonprofit's corporate culture, a new set of donors, and a new set of procedures. Know that there will always be little nuances about being successful in a position that they will never tell you during the interview process, so be prepared by staying nimble and teachable.

**Are there books that every development officer should read?**

"How To Win Friends and Influence People" by Dale Carnegie; and "You, Inc.: The Art of Selling Yourself" by Harry Beckwith

**Noteworthy Nuggets:**

- In contact relationships, meet people where they are and not where you want them to be.
- Keep donors excited. They are not donors to us, but a partner with us.
- Donors don't want to be depressed; they want to be heroes.
- Don't doubt your capacity; don't doubt your capacity to learn.