

# A Decade In: Lessons Learned Along the Way

By Juliana M. Weissbein, CFRE

To me, the greatest privilege of working in the nonprofit sector is the opportunity to give back to those in my community. I can't think of a better way to do that than by reflecting on my time in the field in hopes of offering guidance to those who are new to the profession.

For the last decade, I have grown my career with intention. I have sought advisement along the way and have carefully advanced toward my next move with the input of those who have gone before me. It hasn't always been easy, and I surely have had to learn to fail with grace. Ten years into this journey, I'm grateful to be at a place in my career where I can pay it forward. Here are the top lessons I have learned along the way.

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## IDENTIFY YOUR MENTORS: CHAMPIONS, CHALLENGERS, AND CONNECTORS

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My North Star has always been mentorship. Nothing in my career thus far would have been possible without the guidance I have received from my colleagues, for whom I have the deepest appreciation and from whom I have derived the ambition to challenge myself at each stage of my career. My mentors have helped me realize the potential to make a true difference through our profession.



It is paramount to seek out quality mentors early on. Think of your mentors as your personal board of directors. Apply the same rigorous search criteria when cultivating relationships with them as you would when seeking potential board members. Each of your mentors should serve a different purpose and bring a different strength. It is important to form relationships with those who will not only be your biggest champion but who will also challenge you when you need an extra push or coaching through critical thinking exercises.

## *Promoting a culture of collaboration, independent thinking, equity, and innovation is my utmost concern because with the right training, we can teach, encourage, and inspire others to surpass our goals and truly revolutionize the field.*

Simply put, a mentor who serves as your **champion** is someone further along in their career who will be your greatest advocate. This person is an active and vocal supporter of your professional development, has a keen understanding of your abilities, and is likely to recommend you for projects. A mentor who serves as your **challenger** is a peer with whom you can have the honest and tough conversations needed to help you work through difficult decisions and avoid costly mistakes. Finally, a **connector** is a colleague with an expansive network who can make introductions, believes in your strengths, and will help promote your name so you can land your next job.

While effective mentors often embody many of these traits, your goal is to build a multi-faceted network that you can call upon when you need support, advocacy, or a sounding board. Take the time to make genuine connections with those you admire and be sure to return favors whenever you can. I promise you, the rewards will be tenfold.

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### COMBAT IMPOSTOR SYNDROME BY SEEKING LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

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We've all had that sinking feeling before. You just nailed a presentation to your board of directors or submitted a perfect grant proposal, yet you can't quite seem to shake the feeling that you could have done more or that someone more qualified could have done better.

If this sounds familiar, you may have experienced impostor syndrome: the low, constant rumbling of insecurity that strikes even the most successful among us. It's the feeling that you are not good enough, you don't belong, or that you aren't worthy of the gift you asked for in that grant proposal.

It is important to acknowledge that the symptoms of impostor syndrome may be exacerbated in fundraising professionals who belong to underrepresented populations within our field. People of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, people with disabilities, or anyone else who may not readily have a role model in their workplace with whom they can identify might feel

inadequate, despite having strong qualifications and accomplishments. For fundraisers in these populations, impostor syndrome can complicate an already challenging trajectory in which feelings of isolation may be in play.

To help combat impostor syndrome, it is crucial to validate these feelings and seek out mentors with whom you can identify. Conversely, if you hold a senior position, or you identify similarly to the majority in your community, it is critical to create space and opportunities for colleagues by actively recruiting, promoting, and retaining members of underrepresented populations in all areas of the nonprofit sector.

One of the best ways to work through impostor syndrome is to seek out leadership opportunities and network whenever possible. Is there a board on which you can serve? Does your local AFP chapter offer professional development opportunities? If not, can you approach the board to take the lead in developing the content? The validation you will receive after a job well-done will be verifiable proof that you are the best person to do this work. The more opportunities you give yourself to succeed, the sooner the feelings of impostor syndrome will dissipate, and you will recognize that you are capable and worthy of the success you achieve.

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### FIND YOUR NICHE WHILE STAYING BROAD

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I am purposeful about each career move I make in order to diversify my skill set. My first position was with a larger organization where I focused exclusively on development operations. When assessing my next move, I sought out a smaller organization where I would have the opportunity to cross-collaborate and deepen my understanding of the full fundraising process.

This shift gave me a comprehensive understanding of why a gift is made, not just how. I was able to learn the lifecycle of a gift from the donor's perspective. Building on this exposure, in my next role I served as a frontline fundraiser and interacted directly with donors. Currently, I am back to working exclusively

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on development operations, this time with a holistic understanding of the ecosystem.

Having prior experience with frontline work helps me to strategically implement processes that ensure our staff is performing effectively and that a donor is satisfied with our operations. Building highly specific skills while maintaining a broad understanding of how each element of fundraising functions has better prepared me for a specialized position and will allow me to pivot to other opportunities easily in the long run.

Another way to continue growing your career is to pursue professional development opportunities that will distinguish you from your peers and prove that you are a dedicated, well-rounded, and competent fundraiser. Examples include attaining your CFRE credential, starting a fundraising blog, presenting at conferences, contributing to the advancement of our profession by volunteering with AFP, or pursuing a master's degree in fundraising or nonprofit management. No matter your method, taking a strategic approach to your fundraising career empowers you to leverage your skills, shift in new directions, and excel in the field.

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## COMMIT TO INNOVATION AS PASSIONATELY AS YOU FUNDRAISE

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The fundraising industry is far from perfect. We have all experienced it and read studies proving it to be true. Whether it's the desire to keep overhead costs low, high staff turnover, or the homogeneity of our staffers, our industry urgently needs committed professionals and transformational change agents. If there is one thing I have learned from a career in working toward social justice, it's that creating innovative and visionary workplaces takes time, effort, and capital. The question becomes, are you up for the challenge?

I am not suggesting we eliminate what is working well solely in the name of innovation. Campaigns and initiatives that have proven success with donors

should continue until a deficit occurs or a growth opportunity arises. Rather, I am suggesting that development professionals commit to continuously enhance operations, invest in advanced technology, make data-based decisions, and activate the fundamental changes needed to progress our industry. The potential to solve our world's critical problems depends upon our ability to embrace disruptive innovation.

The best fundraisers are those who are passionate about the missions they serve. My colleagues and I are deeply committed, and witnessing success of the mission is the ultimate reward. Another vital component to bettering our industry and sustaining top fundraising personnel is continuous growth in ourselves, our colleagues, and our operations. I am dedicated to advancing my skills so I can foster the talent around me. Promoting a culture of collaboration, independent thinking, equity, and innovation is my utmost concern, because with the right training we can teach, encourage, and inspire others to surpass our goals and truly revolutionize the field. This is lifelong work. Will you join me? 



*Juliana M. Weissbein, CFRE, is a respected leader and decision influencer in regard to fundraising operations best practices. With over a decade of experience, Juliana thrives on professional growth, team success, measurable results, and inspiring fundraisers to utilize data-based*

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