

Leading the way to professional identity

When I was a young boy I used to love the plastic toys that would come in cereal boxes. They were pretty cool – and the best thing was that they were just there – you didn't have to do any more the pluck them out. All very easy – and in the end just as meaningless!

I recognised early in my fundraising career that just calling yourself a fundraiser, without any sense of objective identity, was a bit like plucking the toy from the cereal box. It was all very easy – and in the end meaningless.

And even if you are OK with that – and sadly, plenty of people still seem to be - I can't help thinking that a version of the emperor's new clothes is being played out as a tag of "professional" is self-proclaimed in front of others who actually do all they can to gain their professional identity.

It's more than a little hollow - and yet still I hear fundraisers, self-professed professionals, complaining that they are not taken seriously.

Really! What do we expect!

Tough call – you bet. And in making it I am well aware that many fundraising practitioners, with years of experience, are darn good at what they do. Some are even exceptional. But that's not the point.

If it were simply a case of doing a good job, however it might be done, then it probably wouldn't matter. But that's all about the individual, and whatever skills, knowledge and instinct they might bring to their role. The problem is, none of this is replicable, there is no standard or discipline, and no basis upon which a profession can be defined and evolve.

You see, being a 'professional' is not about you. It can't be. A profession is bigger than that. And as we strive for identity and respect in fundraising practice it's about time we did a bit of collective lifting around those things that frame professional identity.

So what are the main tenets of a profession? While there will always be varying perspectives, it is generally accepted that a profession is evidenced by;

- Access to association membership
- A code of ethics
- Continuing professional education
- A body of knowledge and research
- A practice (or professional) credential

The good news is that fundraising has all of these elements. The bad news is we lack a shared commitment to embracing them.

And here is the rub. If you don't buy into the idea of professional identity you may not have a sense of what's missing. Life just goes on as it always has.

The impact is more likely felt by causes that are not served as completely as they might be, and organisations that don't recognise the larger opportunity around fundraising and philanthropy.

And the idea and evolution of a profession is certainly impeded by the lack of shared commitment – and for those of us that do share that commitment there is a diminishment of our professional identity because of those who stand apart.

Fundraising practitioners, and particularly fundraising leaders, need to be change agents in order to influence outcomes for the donors, the causes and the organisations they serve. That change starts from within – within the 'profession' – so we can actually be what we say we are.

And speaking of leadership, there's a key role for fundraising leaders in this challenge.

For those who have and reference the marks of professional identity there is a clear role in guiding and mentoring others – and in advocacy at a broader sector level.

For those who haven't the challenge is even more straightforward.

- Join and participate in your professional association (ideally FIA) – hopefully that box is already ticked!
- Pursue your vocation of fundraising ethically and with professional integrity
- Gain your practice credential (CFRE)
- Read, write, attend, teach and contribute to the body of knowledge
- And reference and use evidence in literature and research

Renee Descartes said "I think therefore I am". However there's more to identity as a fundraiser than "I fundraise therefore I am".

It's time we made a collective shift to shared professional identity in fundraising. But this takes leadership – which is a perfect opportunity for fundraising leaders to serve as models and guides as we advance fundraising as a profession.

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****these post nominals simply mean I can call myself a fundraising professional***