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Turning prospects into donors: Do you have the right moves?

Best practices in moves management for higher education

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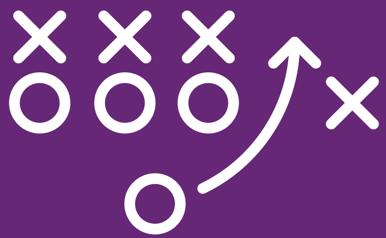

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Why is moves management critical to advancement? 3

What does a successful moves management program look like? 4

Prospecting 4

Cultivation 5

How do I measure success? 8

Moves are actions you take to create and deepen relationships with your top donors and prospects. Managing these moves in a formal, strategic fashion—moves management—is widely recognized as a best practice in major gifts fundraising.

Why is moves management critical to advancement?

The terms were originally coined by G.T. “Buck” Smith and David Dunlop at Cornell University, who studied the science of “changing people’s attitudes so they want to give.” They advocated a systematic, sustained series of steps for increasing a prospect’s “awareness of, knowledge of, interest in, involvement with, and commitment to the institution and its mission.”

Another way to think about moves is as actions an organization takes to bring in donors, build relationships, and raise funds. The individuals being solicited are generally referred to as prospects and those who give as donors. Moves management is usually focused on major donors, the top 20%, who often represent 80-90% of an institution’s funding.

At a high level, the objectives of moves management are to:

- identify prospects
- segment them based on potential giving level and other profile characteristics
- tailor engagement and communications tactics accordingly
- identify the right people on the team to execute each move, including making the “ask”
- continue to deepen the relationship and secure renewed and/or increased gifts over time
- measure success and continually improve the process

All of these steps should be “donor-centric.” In other words, focused on the giver, not simply the gift. On the long-term relationship, not the short-term donation.

Before you make an ask, you must first understand each prospect’s affinity with your cause and institution, their ability to give, and their accessibility. This will take a series of moves—perhaps lunch with the President, a tour of the campus, an invitation to an alumni event, or a call from a Board member. Regardless, start by listening not asking.

Once you have a moves management process in place, your institution can effectively steward its most valuable donor relationships; measure the success of individual gift officers and initiatives; and improve the strength and sustainability of your fundraising and advancement programs.

What does a successful moves management program look like?

Moves management is based on concepts well known in marketing—know your audience, speak their language, and take care of them.

You wouldn’t necessarily send the same communication to a brand new prospect as you would a longtime donor. And some of your donors may enjoy frequent interaction with you, your institution, or other alumni, while others simply want data showing how their gift is being used. Moves management is about creating an engagement plan tailored to each prospect based on the information you learn at every stage of the relationship.

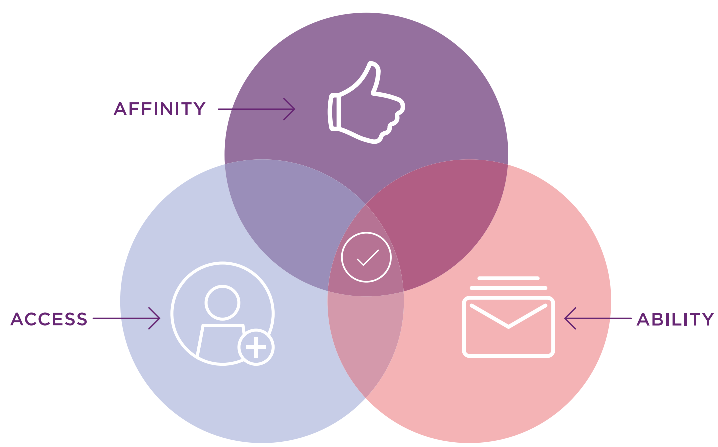
I break moves management into two key components: Prospecting and Cultivation.

Prospecting

Collecting information on an individual’s affinity and ability to give

The first step, which may seem obvious, is to identify a prospect. Prospects are individuals the institution believes—either from information collected by staff or alumni or via word of mouth—has an interest in the institution.

The next step is to determine three things: Affinity, Ability, and Access. In other words: Is this person inclined to support your cause?; Do they have the ability to make a major gift and at what level?; and, Are they someone to whom you can gain access through an introduction by a Board member, existing donor, fellow alumnus, or other stakeholder that has a relationship to the prospect?



Remember, some of the best prospects may be existing donors—those who’ve made a gift, perhaps through one of your mailings, but haven’t been engaged on a more personal level.

In fact, most major gifts come from individuals, corporations, or foundations who have already given smaller gifts or volunteered time and talent. If they are happy with the stewardship of their funds, they will be inclined to give again, most likely at a higher amount. Research shows that 93% of individual donors say they would definitely or probably give again. And 64% would give a larger gift, while 74% would continue to give indefinitely.

People give to an institution that they believe is making a difference in a cause they care about. Donors view their gifts as investments in important work, which they expect to see accomplished. Make sure you demonstrate the return on their investment, both before and after they donate.

Cultivation

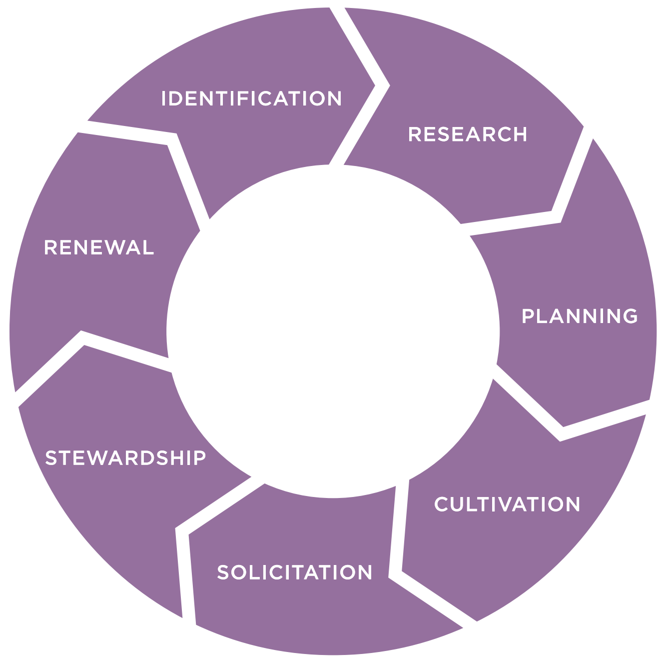
Nurturing the relationship

It's been shown to take six or more moves to properly cultivate a major gift prospect before asking for the actual gift. These moves should be part of a strategic, integrated plan personalized to each donor's interests and motivations.

You can create "high-touch," "medium-touch," and "low-touch" cultivation moves based on which stage you've reached in the plan and how the donor responds to different levels of engagement. High-touch would be personal engagement, perhaps multiple times, by someone important in your institution and important to the donor. Low-touch might be an email with a recent accomplishment that aligns with the donor's interests.

Remember that the most important goal is using donor-centric strategies for building the relationship.

Each move should be thoughtfully crafted to identify and move prospects along the relationship continuum shown in the graphic



1 Identification

Locate prospects with a potential connection to your institution. Ask Board members and existing, highly committed donors to think of prospects they'd be willing to help you engage.

Search online for individuals that give to similar causes or who are philanthropic. If you have the resources, there are databases you can purchase with information on high net worth individuals, foundations, and corporations.

2 Research

Determine affinity, ability, and access as described on page 4. How? Talk to anyone who has an existing relationship with the prospect. Look for information online, perhaps articles on their interests or affiliations. Look in your own database for biographical information if they are an existing donor at a lower level. Again, there are databases you can purchase. The research phase is critical to planning your next moves and for educating the first person who will meet with the donor.

3 Planning

Use everything you know about a prospect to plan your cultivation/moves management strategy. See page 9 for example moves. Keep in mind that planning doesn't stop after you receive a gift. You should be constantly refining your plan as you deepen the relationship over time.

Unless you have a large staff and resources, be realistic in planning. Consider tactics the institution is already doing—events you can invite the prospect to based on their interest in a particular department, student group, or academic program.

Start small and build. Create a plan for each gift officer's top 20 prospects/donors that include one or two moves per month for the first year, even if it's simply a handwritten note.

Keep in mind, moves should be intentional, not passive. While sending a get-well card enhances the relationship, it's not likely to lead directly to a gift.

What moves management is not:

- A strategy for the masses
- A cookie cutter approach
- An overly obvious attempt to pander
- A strategy that lives in one person's head
- A conquest

4 Cultivation

Cultivation and planning go hand in hand. You can establish moves for first engaging a prospect, but your moves should be continually updated as you learn more about the prospect and what works. Up until the day the ask is made, gift officers should constantly add and review information on their top prospects.

Also important to note: Successful cultivation requires a team approach. Emotional connection depends very much on trust and rapport. Use board members or other stakeholders to execute certain moves if it will create a more personal or authentic experience. No turf issues allowed.

As you begin the cultivation process, keep in mind that many organizations are competing for funds. General communications are not likely to get attention. Ideally, a board member, donor, staff member, or volunteer at your institution who knows the prospect well should make the introduction and vouch for your work.

As the relationship grows, stay committed to the donor-centric approach, conveying respect and affection. Invite them to events or speakers' series on campus; ask them to volunteer time or talent, which will make them feel like part of the team and mission; send annual reports with a handwritten note from the president; or have a dean from a college that matches their interests invite them to lunch.

Make sure that, before you make the ask, you have communicated the value of your cause and the potential for impact. Treat their gift like an investment. Explain your plans for the future, how you'll use their funds wisely, and how you'll demonstrate success. And, as always, make an emotional appeal as well. Keep the mission and the people you serve at the forefront at all times.

Establishing a system for tracking all of these moves—as well as the new information you learn along the way—is critical. See page 8 for an overview of systems, processes, and constituent relationship management (CRM).

5 Solicitation

Once you are confident that the relationship is solid and you have a good sense of the appropriate amount to ask for, you can formally solicit the gift. First, determine who should make the ask. This should be the person who has the best relationship and/or respect, often a peer. It should be a person to whom the donor just can't say no.

At the major gift level, solicitations should be made in writing and with a personal follow up. A proposal should outline the need, the requested amount, how you'll demonstrate impact, and the value they will provide to students, alumni, and the institution. The person making the ask can send the proposal ahead of time and then follow up with a visit or phone call, or present the proposal in person. It all depends on the donor.

7 Stewardship

Stewardship is much like cultivation except the focus is on demonstrating the impact you've made since receiving the donation and on finding ways to deepen the relationship. The goal with stewardship is to secure a renewed contribution, or, ideally, a larger gift. For some institutions, planned giving is also a priority—estate planning or deferred giving.

As you plan stewardship moves, ask the following questions:

- Did we find out what motivates the prospect to be philanthropic?
- Did we find out what the prospect loves most about the institution?
- What does it make sense for the next move to be based on the current nature of the relationship?
- How did the prospect/donor originally become involved with the institution? Is this still their main motivation for giving? Or are there now additional drivers?
- If the prospect has renewed or increased their gift, what factor was most influential? Are they committed to a specific part of your mission?
- What do they love about the institution, and what would they like to see improved

Don't forget to listen. Often institutions are so concerned with executing moves and communications that they don't sit back and let the prospect do the talking. Stewardship requires being attuned to interests and concerns as they evolve over time.

A chance conversation with an alumnus when I was working at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte—followed by a series of carefully managed moves with multiple stakeholders—led to funding for a 160-member marching band to support the new football team. The conversation concerned how we each had fond memories of being in marching band, and it evolved into a discussion of how to enhance the fan experience at UNC-Charlotte games with live music. The alumnus then took the idea and ran with it. My role was to coordinate the moves of everyone from the Vice Chancellor to the athletic and music departments to the many donors that came together to make a drumline, and ultimately a full marching band, possible. It paid to listen. And it took a team effort.

8 Renewal

This is the ask once the prospect has already given for the first time. The same rules apply. Figure out who has the best relationship and has the best chance of securing a renewal or increased gift. As you develop a proposal or written ask, draw on everything you've learned about the donor. Include language and stories on the things they care about most. If you know they have specific concerns, address them proactively. And, as always, make your appeal emotional and sincere.

Although moves management is a team effort, you need to designate one staff member to manage the process. Assign a "Moves Manager" for each prospect. This individual ensures that all moves are coordinated and the right people are engaged at the right time. Responsibilities for the moves manager include:

- Developing an individualized strategy for each prospect
- Executing the plan—seeing that moves are made
- Ensuring all information is captured in a central database
- Continually refining moves for each prospect
- Coordinating volunteers, board members, and staff
- Liasing with other departments as needed to prepare communications or make requests to faculty and staff outside the fundraising office to engage in person with the prospect

It's vital that you create formal systems and processes for tracking your moves management program. This includes the moves made, and to be made, for each prospect; the progress of each gift officer and initiative; and the program as a whole. Technology offers great opportunities for automating and driving the process, so that staff can focus on personal interactions and donors have a seamless experience.

How do I measure success?

Set clear goals

The first step is to set overall goals for the department followed by individual goals for development officers and alumni staff. Yes, alumni staff have a role in moves management. It's is a team sport. Everyone participates. Paint a clear picture of what success looks like for both the department and the institution and share it widely.

Determine what will be accomplished within specific timeframes. It could be total dollars raised, total moves per prospect, engagement of non-donors, movement of mid-level donors to major donors, etc. Set realistic goals based on resources and manage expectations with institutional leadership. Motivate staff, specifically gift officers and moves managers, and track their progress with short, intermediate, and long-term goals.

Implement a tracking system

Starting a new system can be daunting, but it doesn't have to be. The most important thing to consider is how to ensure the quality and accuracy of data entered into your CRM tool.

Create a policy for all staff that interactions should be documented, so that you have an accurate history for each donor. Knowing that a prospect indicated interest in a particular scholarship fund, would like to volunteer for a certain initiative, or follows the local art scene can be priceless information when determining the next move in their personalized plan.

Consider who will be in charge of getting the information (gift officers, alumni staff, faculty, etc.) and who will update the system (moves managers, administrative staff, etc.). Make sure staff document ideas for future activities to help with strategic planning.

Figure out what you want to track

Start by determining which donor segments to track and why. If you're low on resources, focus on top priorities. Examples include:

- **First time, one-time, and recurring donors**
- **Mid-level and major donors**
- **Prospects assigned to gift officers**
- **Good prospects that haven't yet been assigned**
- **Alumni prospects that have participated in an event or activity but never donated**
- **Longtime donors currently making small donations who have greater capacity to give**

Next, consider what information to track. The answer varies for each institution, but best practice is to capture at a minimum:

- **Biographical information (email address, phone number, physical address)**
- **Actions (Subscription to your newsletter or volunteering at events)**
- **Relationships (family members; employment)**
- **Giving history**
- **Wealth assessment**
- **Information specific to the institution (college, major, year graduated)**

Then consider additional details that might advance the relationship:

- **Hobbies, interests**
- **Existing relationships with students/faculty/staff**
- **Student organizations they belonged to, extra-curricular activities, learning communities they were enrolled in (think honors college, scholar programs)**
- **Other charities they support**
- **Types of organizations/initiatives they are inclined to support (music, art, theater, sports, study abroad)**
- **Current sports affiliations (season ticket holder, former athlete)**
- **Posts on social media**

You should also track all communications they receive, as well as interactions with staff or other stakeholders, such as:

- **Phone calls, correspondence, meetings (in-person or via technology), conversations at events, text messages, email, letters, general mailings (newsletters, brochures, invitations)**
- **Word of mouth (think alumni volunteers or other donors)**
- **Behind the scenes tour of the institution**
- **Event invitations/attendance**
- **Insider newsletter(s), delivered on a schedule (monthly, quarterly, semi-yearly)**
- **Invitation to lunch or dinner with president/chancellor/VP and/or program staff**
- **Invitation to give feedback on strategic plan or case statement**

A good advancement CRM tool can track an unlimited number of constituents and their vital information, but the database is only as good as the information entered. Strategies for ensuring quality and accuracy of data:

- **Ensure that all staff know what to track.**
- **Set up status rankings for each stage of the prospect pipeline, such as identification, cultivation, solicitation, and stewardship, so that staff are prompted to keep the process moving.**
- **Encourage staff to set reminders for tasks on their calendars.**
- **Setup time-based workflow rules.**
- **Set up action plans and reusable task templates that can be personalized for individual prospects and used by all staff.**
- **Automate tasks as much as possible to reduce the risk of overlooking a donor or forgeting an important date.**
- **Define standard communications plans for each donor level with planned moves standardized for each. This could be newsletters for first time donors, handwritten notes for annual fund donors, videos on success stories for board members, etc.**

Make sure to stress the importance of tracking to all staff who interact with prospects and donors in any way (checking them in at events, answering the phone, responding to online comments or questions). A minor detail may seem unimportant but could be an integral piece of information. An offhand comment about remembering with fondness the fun times in a residence hall could lead to a naming opportunity when the hall is refurbished.

One of the top benefits to having a tracking system in place is not having to start over with prospects when there is staff turnover. After all, volunteers, alumni and donors remain with an institution even when staff move on.

Finally, set up reports that will allow you to view progress against specific goals. Run them at set times to support strategic decisions.

Just a few examples:

- **Progress toward annual fund goal**
- **Relationship between number of communications and gift renewals**
- **Number of donors that increased their donation last year vs. this year**
- **Number and average gift size of prospects that attended an event**

Leaders should establish KPIs (key performance indicators) for gift officers. KPIs should be a combination of dollars raised and moves made. This help in evaluating whether specific moves resulted in gifts.

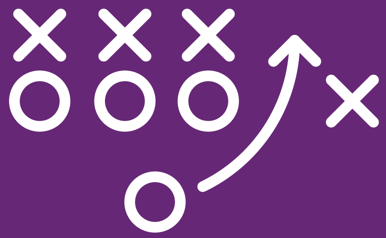
It's important to note that institutions across higher education are increasingly committed to improving data management, reporting, and analytics. The most innovative leaders are instilling a performance-oriented culture at every level of the institution and implementing tools and technology to increase transparency and accountability. Once you have a strong moves management plan with goals, measures, and meaningful reports, you will be in a good position to succeed as your institution evolves.

In closing

In my 20 years in fundraising, I have watched the field mature and advance in large part by embracing the principles of moves management. Within higher education, I see the most successful institutions implementing this type of systematic, highly personalized approach to major donor cultivation. That's why I urge other institutions to create strategies and systems, however small to start, to support the practice of moves management. Doing so is critical to remaining competitive, and, even more importantly, to building enduring relationships with students from the moment they enroll to the rest of their lives as loyal alumni.

While David Dunlop has retired, he recently spoke to Jim Lord at The Center for Leadership Philanthropy about the moves management concept he originally developed and its continued relevance today. "If you want to inspire the giving of ultimate gifts, a cause or organization needs to be in the life of the person with quality, frequency, and continuity. And the frequency can't be just once a year you come by and ask for an annual gift … you have to engage them in all the areas in which they have capacity to contribute—time, talent, association, all sorts of ways that are unique to them, to support the organization that you want them to care about."

In other words, as you develop a moves management program, always keep the interests of individual donors at the forefront. Being "donor-centric" isn't part of your strategy. It **is** your strategy.`



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