Development Operations Assessment

An effective and productive development operation is essential to a school’s long-term ability to sustain excellence in student programs. An accountable Development Office must evaluate how well its operations reflect best practices and whether objectives are being achieved. A standard metric makes this evaluation possible.

The following questionnaire provides a framework for appraising your performance, and reviewing the practices that define success. Development Directors can use these metrics to analyze the state of your operations, and establish a baseline. They suggest ways to implement best practices in your development operations, and to measure progress and communicate it to the School Head, the Board, and the school community.

This questionnaire is based on ISM’s Development Stability Markers, two of the ISM Stability Markers™, which ISM uses to assess operations and governance. In development, two areas are evaluated: consistent donor engagement and development office management. The first part of the questionnaire addresses the processes involved in accompanying donors through the donor cycle. The second part concerns the operations and practices of the Development Office, including database management; tracking and recording gifts and engagement activities; producing appropriate reports for the Head, the Board, and other constituencies; and budgeting and planning.

The items in this survey are intended to help you reflect on the range of elements that contribute to effective development operations, and to identify areas of practice in your own school that may require further attention. This survey revises and replaces a self-evaluation questionnaire presented in Idea & Perspectives, vol. 35, no. 7. The questions are drawn from a longer online survey that provides a more in-depth examination of development operations, which is offered to schools through our survey department and used in development consulting.

In this survey, the two development markers can be treated separately or together for assessment purposes. There are 28 questions, with a maximum total score of 100 points. Your total for all questions gives a score out of 100 that you can treat as an overall index of your development operations. All surveys of this kind must, be considered in light of your own school’s circumstances, and can be refined and tailored to your own operations. But the following scale offers a general guideline for self-scoring. A score of 90-100 is an indication of an excellent development program and a solid predictor of school stability. Scores of 75-89 show good performance. A result in the 60-74 range suggests that while in some areas of development you are doing well, there are other areas of your operations in need of improvement. A score of 40-59 indicates that your development operations are getting started, and demonstrates significant development weaknesses that need to be addressed. Below 40 should be graded as poor, suggesting a development program that has much to improve to begin to make a significant contribution to the school.

Each of the two sections of the survey can also be evaluated separately as an indicator of where you stand on the two Development Stability Markers. The 15 questions in the first section, addressing consistent donor engagement, have a maximum possible score of 60. The 13 questions in the second section, addressing Development Office management, have a maximum possible score of 40.

The self-scoring scale for interpreting these results treats values of 50 and as great, 40-49 as good, 25-39 as getting started, and below 24 as poor. The second section of the survey, addressing Development Office management, has 13 questions, giving a maximum score of 40. Here the ratings are 35-40 great, 25-34 good, 15-24 getting started, and under 15 poor.

Consistent Donor Engagement

Consistent donor engagement refers to how we identify, engage, evaluate, solicit, recognize, and steward donors and prospects. The amount and kind of attention paid to your school’s various constituencies (Trustees, parents, alumni, parents of alumni, grandparents, faculty and staff, etc.), when not actually soliciting them, can make enormous differences in any school’s “soft income” success, both short- and long-term.

Identify: Know who your donors and prospects are—their values, interests, resources, philanthropic inclination, interest in your school, and giving history.

How effective is your office at …

1. collecting data and identifying prospects through collaboration with the admission office, finance office, Head of School, Trustees, etc.?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____

2. reviewing current and past donors to assess their current level of engagement?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____

Engage: Involve, interest and inform your donors and prospects to strengthen their connection to your school.

How effective is your office at …

3. promoting a culture of philanthropy among your various constituencies (e.g., Trustees, parents, alumni/ae, grandparents, faculty and staff)?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____

4. maintaining regular contact with current and prospective donors through print and electronic communication and engagement activities (e.g., special events, invitations to campus functions)?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____
Evaluate: Deepen your understanding of your donors and prospects’ interests, values, giving capacity and philanthropic inclinations.

How effective is your office at …

5. maintaining records and conducting research about current and prospective donors, addressing their values and interests, philanthropic priorities, and giving capacity?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

6. assessing each donor to determine an appropriate next engagement?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

Solicit: Invite your donors and prospects to make an investment in your school, i.e., to act on their values and interests.

How effective is your office at …

7. creating a case for support that invites investment and clearly indicates how and why a gift advances the mission and makes a difference?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

8. customizing solicitation strategies for different constituencies (e.g., parents, alumni/ae, faculty)?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

9. assembling well-prepared professional and volunteer teams for face-to-face solicitations of prospective leadership donors? (Successful teams typically include some combination of School Head, Trustees, volunteer leaders, and senior development staff.)
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

Solicit: Invite your donors and prospects to make an investment in your school, i.e., to act on their values and interests.

How effective is your office at …

10. sending acknowledgements within 48 hours of receiving a gift or pledge?
    - Extremely effective (4)
    - Effective (3)
    - Somewhat effective (2)
    - Ineffective (1)
    - Not at all (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

11. extending appropriate public and private recognition to donors (e.g., personalized thank you letters, Annual Report, school magazine, special events)
    - Extremely effective (4)
    - Effective (3)
    - Somewhat effective (2)
    - Ineffective (1)
    - Not at all (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

Steward: Keep donors involved; engage them in interactions and experiences with the school, continue to demonstrate how their present and past support makes a difference in the life of the school.

How effective is your office at …

13. making frequent contact with donors throughout the school year to remind them how their gifts are appreciated and have made an impact?
    - Extremely effective (4)
    - Effective (3)
    - Somewhat effective (2)
    - Ineffective (1)
    - Not at all (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

14. establishing and following policies and procedures to ensure appropriate use of gifts and to uphold professional standards?
    - Extremely effective (4)
    - Effective (3)
    - Somewhat effective (2)
    - Ineffective (1)
    - Not at all (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

15. involving the School Head, Trustees, faculty, parents, alumni/ae, and other constituents in planning and executing identification, engagement, solicitation, recognition, and stewardship strategies?
    - Extremely effective (4)
    - Effective (3)
    - Somewhat effective (2)
    - Ineffective (1)
    - Not at all (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

Score (0–12) _____

Total for Consistent Donor Engagement (0–60) _____

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50–60</td>
<td>Great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–39</td>
<td>Getting Started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 or less</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

©2017 Independent School Management
Development Office Management

These items refer to the Development Office’s capacity to:
(1) Provide support for all phases of the donor cycle;
(2) Strategically plan and budget development operations;
(3) Collect, track, record, and organize data on donors and prospects;
(4) Conduct analysis and provide reports as needed for the Head, Trustees, marketing communications, etc.;
(5) Maintain a professional and well-trained staff.

Database Management

How effective is your office at …
1. establishing and following procedures and standards for data entry to ensure database organization, accuracy, and integrity?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

2. tracking all contacts with donors and prospects and identifying where they are in the donor cycle?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____

Gift Accounting

How effective is your office at …
3. establishing and following Board-approved policies and procedures for receiving and processing donations?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

4. distinguishing and tracking types/uses of gift categories, such as restricted vs. unrestricted, annual, special events, capital, and endowment?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____

Analysis and Reporting

How effective is your office at …
5. tracking and analyzing data to produce regular fund-raising reports for the School Head, Development Committee, Trustees, volunteers, and others?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

6. providing direct and logistical support for donor engagement and solicitation (e.g., briefing materials, giving and contact history, research)?
   - Extremely effective (4)
   - Effective (3)
   - Somewhat effective (2)
   - Ineffective (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____

Planning and Goal-Setting

7. Do you have a development office mission statement?
   - Yes (2)
   - No (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

8. Does your office have an annual development plan that:
   a. aligns with the School’s Strategic Plan/Strategic Financial Plan?
      - Yes (1)
      - No (0)
      - Don’t know (0)
   b. indicates the associated costs and revenue sources?
      - Yes (1)
      - No (0)
      - Don’t know (0)
   c. identifies parties responsible for each objective?
      - Yes (1)
      - No (0)
      - Don’t know (0)
   d. defines a timeline for completion of each objective?
      - Yes (1)
      - No (0)
      - Don’t know (0)

9. To what extent are your fundraising goals based on data (e.g., gift amounts and participation rates in recent years, information regarding donors)?
   - Completely (2)
   - Somewhat (1)
   - Not at all (0)
   - Don’t know (0)

   Score (0–8) _____

Professional Growth and Renewal

10. Does each member of your development team have a professional growth and renewal plan?
    - Yes (2)
    - No (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

11. Is each member of your development team evaluated every year?
    - Yes (2)
    - No (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

    Score (0–4) _____

Budgeting

12. Does your development budget provide funds to support all phases of the donor cycle?
    - Yes (2)
    - No (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

13. Does your development budget provide for all aspects of effective office management?
    - Yes (2)
    - No (0)
    - Don’t know (0)

    Score (0–4) _____

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total for Development Office Management (0–40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35–40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 or less</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions and Next Steps

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total for Both Development Stability Markers (0–100)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>90–100</td>
<td>Great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–89</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–74</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–59</td>
<td>Getting Started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 or less</td>
<td>Poor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A strong development program makes essential contributions to the success of an independent school. It provides funds for enhancements to the school program that create the conditions for delivering a superior education and a richer student experience. It is central to funding capital improvements, and a major factor in long-term financial stability. These Development Stability Markers provide a measure of how your program is performing relative to the highest standards in the field.

Your scores on this survey help identify your present strengths and weaknesses, and develop strategies for improving your operations. ISM recommends a structured approach to acting on these results.

First, review your overall score. This will give you a sense of how much needs to be done, which gives you a basis for projecting a time line and assessing what people and resources will be required to achieve your objectives.

Second, look at all the cases where you responded “Don’t know.” The quickest remedial action you can take on these points is to find the answers to these questions. Any actions you take must be informed by a thorough understanding of your current situation.

Third, identify specific areas where your operations are least optimal: e.g., are your solicitation efforts ineffective? Are you not doing enough to recognize and steward your donors? Is your development office inconsistent in record-keeping, or upholding gift-acceptance policies? The areas where your scores are lowest are where your efforts should first be focused. If there are a number of such areas, it is essential to prioritize. Select two or three items that you will seek to address in the near term, and concentrate your action planning on improving those aspects of your operations.

For setting priorities, ISM’s research indicates that the foundation of all successful development operations is good record-keeping — database management, recording, tracking, and updating prospect information, donor contacts, gift amounts and purposes, etc. Without reliable, up-to-date, and readily available information, all development activities are weakened. If your survey responses indicate deficiencies in these areas, they should get top priority in your action planning.

Finally, communicate and coordinate with your School Head and the other advancement officers (in admission and marketing/communications) about your survey results and your plans for moving forward.

These metrics provide an objective basis for discussion about the responsibilities, needs, and successes of the development operation, and its place in the school’s strategy for the future.

Discussion

All advancement staff—in admissions, marketing communication, and development—face enormous scrutiny over return on investment, organizational performance, strategic governance, and their contribution to securing and sustaining your school’s future success.

The set of six core values, and associated standards of excellence, are intended to guide you in honoring your responsibilities to your school, to your constituents both current and future, to the students and families you serve, and to one another. These principles form a standard of professionalism in your execution of those responsibilities for all who work in school advancement offices.

Your responses on this survey will highlight for you those areas in which you are achieving excellence, and areas that you can target for improvement. The survey items give an indication of best practices in each area that you can use as a guide for reinforcing and improving the services you offer to your school and all your constituents. ISM recommends that you use these results to develop an action plan for deepening and strengthening the capacity and performance of your Advancement Team.

Developing Your Action Plan

In light of your scores in this assessment, you can now proceed to consider your next steps to improve and enhance your development operations. This section is a guide to developing a plan of action.

1. Scope of action

Consider first your overall total score. This will give you a sense of where you stand with respect to an ideal program that implements the core values and pursues best practices in all phases of advancement. Your plan should start by estimating the scope of the actions you need to undertake to get closer to that objective.

How big is our task?

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

What personnel and resources will we need?

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

How long will it take?

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

2. Be informed

Your scores in this assessment are greatly affected by “Don’t know” responses. The scoring assumes that advancement directors must be well informed about their existing operations in order to optimize them; hence it gives zero points for “Don’t know”. The first step in your action plan should be to review your responses, identify the things you don’t know, and find the answers. Your operation may be better than your scores suggest, but not knowing seriously hinders your ability to take constructive action.

What don’t I know?

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________
3. Specific needs

Consider your score on each of the core values. Your action plan should prioritize the ones with the lowest scores, as these are the areas of greatest need.

**Goal #1:**

What actions are needed ______________________________

Personnel and resources required ________________________

Timeline for implementation ______________________________

**Goal #2:**

What actions are needed ________________________________

Personnel and resources required ________________________

Timeline for implementation ______________________________

**Goal #3:**

What actions are needed ________________________________

Personnel and resources required ________________________

Timeline for implementation ______________________________

---

1 See ISM Stability Markers: The Fourth Iteration, Ideas & Perspectives, 39-8
2 See ISM Stability Markers: How do you score?, ISM, 35-7
3 The full survey is available through ISM's Survey Department and Advisory Services.
4 We are grateful to Professor Gregory Guy of New York University for his lead work on developing these measures and analyses, and preparing this article.
5 ISM defines soft income dollars are those solicited as compared hard income a school is legally entitled to collect, primarily through contracted provision of services (e.g. tuition payments, fees for special programs, charges for extended day care, fees for summer programs, income from rental of facilities, income from transportation and food services.