

What happens when a high-potential development officer has a career-changing moment?

Jim Hodge, like too many development officers, found himself facing burnout. Exposure to fresh ideas not only kept him in the field, but gave him a new mindset that laid the foundation for an exceptional career.

Today, after more than 35 years in major and principal gifts, Jim facilitates breakthrough philanthropic investments in medical research and innovation at the University of Colorado. He points to his early “conversion experience” as the key to his success.

Lessons here for any institution faced with the ever-growing challenge of recruiting, developing, and retaining exceptional talent.

A recipe for burnout

- Make eight phone calls.
- Set up four visits.
- Make four asks.
- Get one or two gifts.
- Rinse and repeat.

“I came, I asked, they gave, I left. Very little philanthropic joy, either for the benefactors or for me.”

That’s how Jim Hodge remembers the first few years of his career in advancement, working at a university. At the brink of burnout from what he

now calls “full-frontal philanthropy” — and about to quit the field — he stumbled across Jim Lord’s writing for professionals.

This pivotal moment in his career (he even calls it a “conversion experience”) changed his outlook on his work in development.

“Exposure to these ideas shifted the energy of my work,” he says today. “I saw how I could stand side-by-side with the benefactor, looking at a shared horizon and inviting them to take a walk with our organization. To make a life, a community, a planet more fulfilling, more uplifting, more sustainable. Side-by-side, we can ask: What kind of world do you want to live in and leave behind for your grandchildren?”

Jim’s new-found spirit of inspiration, meaning, and possibility not only kept him in the field, it shaped the rest of his career in major and principal gifts, as well as his leadership in the field.

Ideas move into action

Jim Hodge remembers clearly the first time he put his new perspective into action.

“We got a phone call. This wonderful family, owners of a small business that had done quite well, wanted to give a gift to the university for their mom’s 70th birthday. She was a proud graduate of the university who was planning to be a teacher but then went into the family business.”

Jim and the Director of Development drove out to see the family. In the car, numbers flew back and forth.

“What you think we should ask for?”

\$5,000? \$10,000?

More? Less?

At last, Jim cut through the chatter.

“We really have no idea,” he said, “we’ve never even met these people. Why don’t we just ask them

what would be meaningful to them? And just hear what they want to say?”

And that’s how they started the meeting — by asking what would bring the most meaning to the family and the most joy to their mother.

“It turned into a lovely, lovely conversation about their mother,” Jim recalls.

Right then and there, with the folks from the university in the room, the family had a conversation among themselves that they hadn’t ever had before. They quickly gravitated toward an idea with lasting significance — an idea of their own creation, beyond anything the university team had imagined.

Just a few minutes into the visit, one of the family members asked: “What would it take to create a permanent, fully funded scholarship?”

The answer was at least 20 times any of the numbers that had been tossed around in the car.

“It ended up being a beautiful conversation, instead of a sales call,” Jim recalls.

“We weren’t telling and selling. We were just inquiring into what would be most meaningful, instead of trying to figure out \$5,000 versus \$10,000.”

“We could’ve gone in as usual, do the auction in the car, make all the decisions ourselves, get in there and boom: we settle for less than what could have been (for the institution and for the family). A shift in our attitude plus a few simple questions changed the whole conversation — and both the magnitude and the significance of the outcome. There’s a higher road and deeper well. And then all of a sudden, there’s a breakthrough in there.”

Raising the bar in major gifts

Jim is modest about his work as a principal gift officer. “I try never to say ‘I raised \$X.’ I would say I have the pleasure of working with inspired

benefactors. My role is to create inspiring, compelling ideas.”

Today, as Associate Vice Chancellor at Anschutz Medical Campus of the University of Colorado, Jim collaborates with entrepreneurs who make dramatic investments in medical research and innovation. And he points to the spirit behind his work as key to success in this kind of breakthrough philanthropy.

“We spend all our time asking questions of value, questions of purpose, questions of meaning. Rarely do we ask about money. Instead, someone gets to the point of saying ‘I’m in ... what would it take to do that?’ The question becomes, what kind of stake do you want in this important effort? This approach

is so much more authentic and natural for me. The anxiety and the tension are totally gone. I know that benefactors feel the same way.”

“These entrepreneurs say they’re sick and tired of being manipulated — politically for their votes, economically for consumerism, and philanthropically for their generosity. So there is a road less traveled here. An opportunity to create containers for important conversations, to ask questions that bring forth big ideas.”

“If you’re going to really raise the bar in major gifts, you have to first raise the conversation to a bigger narrative. Otherwise, make eight calls, get four visits, make four asks ...”

“Sooner or later, all of us find ourselves at that fork in the road,” Jim says, “where we can have an experience that changes everything. Or we can never reach our potential ... or even burn out and leave the profession, as I almost did.”

When seeking out pivotal experiences, Jim urges his colleagues to choose those that let you “settle down and think more deeply,” so you can see more of the spirit of philanthropy, the why, the purpose. “The spirit will sustain you when the techniques fail you. And the programs offered by Jim Lord and Pam McAllister at The Center for Leadership Philanthropy are the gold standard for this kind of growth in our field.”

Jim Hodge

Associate Vice Chancellor, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus; former Vice-Chair of Leadership Gifts and Strategic Initiatives, Mayo Clinic. (Jim was last in a group with us in 2014. He is a frequent speaker and keynotes several national conferences in addition to his day job.)



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Jim Lord and Pam McAllister, Co-Founders

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