

When the board meeting agenda turns to fundraising, board members may get a little uncomfortable. Why? Because they know that one of these days, if not today, somebody's going to ask them to raise some money. And lots of people just hate, fear and freeze up when they're asked to do so. But the board needs to be involved in the fundraising effort somehow, doesn't it?

The answer is YES, the board needs to be involved in fundraising. But first, define what you mean by "board involvement." You're not being fair to your board (or if you serve on a board, you are not being fair to yourself), when involvement in fundraising only means "go out and browbeat your friends into writing a check." Ugh. I won't do that either. There are better ways.

Boards really need to put some effort into defining their roles. They need to collaborate, so they can agree on what their fundraising role should be, and then implement that new role. I like to think that the board's *primary* job is that of governance, which means setting direction, exercising leadership, holding the CEO or Executive Director accountable, and exercising fiduciary responsibility over the money. Figuring out how the board can accomplish such strategic objectives is therefore "Job One." But the very next job needs to be fundraising. And since fundraising covers a lot of territory, the board is always well-advised to figure out this fundraising role, and discuss it regularly.

This article reviews the five primary levels of fundraising involvement that every nonprofit board should consider. Some boards, and some board members, are ready to take on the role of direct solicitation and cultivation of donors, while others are nowhere near ready. There are some organizations that want their board members to raise money, and others that don't. But all boards need to consider these five focus areas, and decide which is "right" for them.

Focus #1: Set Fundraising Targets.

Focus #1 is the lowest level of fundraising involvement for the board, but it is highly strategic. The board should participate in setting goals and objectives for income, making sure that the operations of the organization are being funded adequately and properly. This sort of work is a normal part of strategic planning anyway. Somebody needs to create the marching orders, with a realistic operating budget and projections for income for the future. Whether you serve on the board of an all-volunteer organization, or the institution is large and has a big professional staff, a classic and valuable role for the board is to participate in setting fundraising targets.

While it's usually the staff's job to prepare a budget, the board needs to oversee that budget, considering whether adequate funds have been allocated for all the right things. Sometimes staff either overlooks key expenditures (such as the cost of fundraising), or understates them (such as the cost of designing and maintaining a website). The board can contribute by having a "big picture" view of what it should take to run operations at desired levels of capacity, challenging

line items that seem to be over- or under-estimated, and otherwise bringing a more objective point of view to the budgeting process.

The board need not become micro-managers, looking over the staff's shoulders trying to save a few bucks here and there on office supplies. But it IS the board's job to collaborate with staff in order to define fundraising goals that satisfy operating requirements, and that everyone can live with. Board members are likely to have a broader perspective since they act more as advisors and less as staff. So their perspectives on the amount of money being raised, and how that money is allocated, make a wonderful contribution to their fundraising role.

Focus #2: Monitor Fundraising Outputs and Achievements.

Focus #2 represents a slightly higher degree of involvement, but still doesn't require that individual board members go out and "make the ask." This focus area is directly connected with the board's general fiduciary role. Rather than being the passive recipients of a boring fundraising report, board members should review progress against the fundraising plan regularly, at least once a month, scrutinizing the delta between "planned" and "actual" results. A monthly review is just often enough and not too often. After all, out of sight, out of mind; it's too easy to lose focus and motivation if you review progress quarterly or (even worse) annually; a monthly review provides enough insight for the board to recommend course corrections and observe their impact. If the board doesn't meet monthly, then it would be wise to create a committee which will conduct a monthly review. These reviews can be handled by web or telephone conferencing techniques, for the sake of convenience.

Remember, the board's governance role includes accountability, namely holding the executive director, and itself, accountable for achieving the organization's goals and objectives. Provide a way for the board to monitor progress against the fundraising plan, and your board will be able to exercise such accountability – based on realistic, timely and accurate information. With no key performance indicators that measure and monitor both activities and results, accountability is really tough to create.

Focus #3: Offer Guidance on Priorities.

This Focus area is another step closer to true involvement in fundraising. While the board is monitoring outputs and achievements as above, they are also in an excellent position to re-assess funding priorities. Sometimes staff members become so close to the daily grind that they can't see the forest for the trees.

The board is in a great position to evaluate the popularity or achievements of various programs and services. For example, maybe Program A is losing its audience, even though the organization continues to fund it at a high level, while Program B could serve many more people, but it has been under-funded for several years. These are the sorts of issues where the board's perspective can be pertinent.

Furthermore, by offering guidance on funding priorities, the board is utilizing its governance authority. Board members, thanks to their varying perspectives and expertise, bring differing

perspectives on the uses to which the institution's money should be put. Discussions about funding priorities will enhance the board's governance role, and raise the level of collegiality and mutual respect between board and staff.

Focus #4: Leverage Their Connections.

At Focus #4, board members start to do the “heavy lifting” of fundraising. Many board members are local business leaders or well-known philanthropists. Folks like these tend to have lots of contacts and connections, people whose names they can share with the agency as potential leads for cultivation. These introductions are valuable to the fundraising effort, since they turn “cold” calls into warm calls. Such leads are already pre-qualified by the referring board member, and thus it's easier to get them to respond. By simply sharing their contacts, board members make a significant contribution to the fundraising effort.

However, it's not uncommon for board members to resist requests to leverage their connections, or even to become defensive when such requests are made. So it's important for staff to be respectful and diplomatic when asking for introductions, making clear why the request is being made and how the introduction will be used. Board members themselves must appreciate that there is no real downside to introducing their personal and business connections to the organization which they govern. Such introductions are opportunities to bring attention to the agency in a positive way, and improve its standing in the community, whether the board member's contact gives money or not. After all, the board member would probably not give any time to an organization that he/she didn't respect and believe in, so simply extending knowledge about the institution's good work is all that's being asked.

Finally, remember that some board members may lack influential connections in the community. These board members deserve respect, and the recognition that their governance contribution and perspectives make a huge contribution to the organization's mission. Make sure to treat them with respect and avoid making them feel awkward or left out. They contribute to the institution through their governance efforts, and through their experience and perspectives.

If no-one on board has any such valuable connections, however, it might be time to rethink the make-up of the board and recruit others who can utilize their networks.

Focus #5: Raise money for the organization.

Focus #5 is the deepest level of involvement that board members can have in fundraising. And there are a couple of ways to fulfill this role. One is for the board member to play “supporting actor,” accompanying a staff member on prospect visits, to support and reinforce the value of the call. Another is for the board member to play the “lead” role, by establishing the relationship, cultivating the gift, and closing the deal. In either case, make sure that the organization has put together a fundraising toolkit, so that donor cultivation is not being reinvented every time.

Whether the board member is supporting staff or raising funds on their own, the staff is responsible for putting together that much-needed toolkit. The toolkit can be elaborate or simple, but at the very least it must include:

- Documents that are prepared for the prospect, including:
 - A copy of the organization’s Case for Support, the document that ‘makes the case’ for sponsoring or donating money to the agency in question. The Case for Support should also include ways in which donors can give, suggest levels of giving, and demonstrate programs or services to which the gift could be allocated.
 - Collateral or “leave-behind” materials such as flyers, brochures, annual reports and other items that further enhance the organization’s reputation.
- Documents that are used only by the fundraising individual or team, including:
 - A copy of the organization’s development plan, showing income targets, targets for diversification, and other information about development. This document is not given to the donor prospect; instead it is used as a guideline by the person doing the fundraising.
 - Suggested probing questions, questions that should put the prospect at ease and encourage him or her to open up.

Whether the board is ready to play supporting or leading roles, don’t let them go out into the market without “air cover.” Provide those board members – AHEAD OF TIME - with the fundraising toolkit, guidelines and rules they need to follow, and limitations they need to respect. Put your toolkit in place well in advance of fundraising activity, and avoid fundraising mishaps before they take place.

And A Bonus: The Give-Or-Get Policy

There’s another function related to peer solicitation, and that’s the so-called “give or get” policy. Having such a policy in place is becoming a “best practice” in the fundraising world. “Give or get” policies mean that each board member is expected to donate a certain amount of money per year, or to convince others to donate that same amount on the board member’s behalf. For some boards, the level is modest, at only a few hundred dollars; for others, the sum is considerably larger. A major hospital recently established a \$25,000 minimum donation level for its board members – and achieved 100% compliance.

Major donors, grant-makers and corporate sponsors are much easier to cultivate, when they know that the organization’s board also contributes.

A Final Note about the Make-Up of Your Board

Once the board starts to become involved in fundraising, you quickly find out if you’ve put together the right board or not. Many grassroots and startup organizations populate their first boards with ‘friends of the family’ and other people who love the founder and want to help. These may be wonderful, generous souls, but may lack the professionalism, expertise, wealth and social influence to serve the mission. So it’s a good idea to create a Board Skills and Talents Matrix, showing the kinds of talents, expertise, personal wealth and other resources that would be desirable on your board.

Example: Board Skills & Talents Matrix

Board Members	Passion for Mission	Prior Board Experience	Lawyers, Bankers, CPA's	Entrepreneurs	Significant Personal Wealth
1	X	X	X	X	X
2	X	X	X	X	X
3	X	X	X		X
4	X	X	X		X
5	X				
6	X				
7	X				

Keep the size of the board down to a manageable number, anywhere from about seven to about thirteen. Odd numbers are best (no tied votes). Too many more than that and it's tough to gain consensus in a timely manner. However, if your board has traditionally been very large (over twenty-five persons) or there is some legislation in place that requires a large board, you have to live with it. Once you have the size of the board decided upon, then figure out how many persons need to hold certain types of professional expertise, credentials, wealth, personal connections and so on.

Building an "ideal" board, based on the characteristics in your matrix, actually makes the fundraising role run more smoothly. Their combined professional perspectives, experience with leadership and governance, and community recognition do half the fundraising job even before anybody knocks on a single door.

SUMMARY

When it comes to the board's role in fundraising, there is no single answer – and no easy answer either. It behooves every nonprofit board to collaborate on defining that role, upholding their mutual decision and commitment, and staying focused on the desired results.

About the Author: Ellen Bristol, president of Bristol Strategy Group, has been working with nonprofit agencies to improve their fund development results for the past sixteen years. When asked to describe her company's philosophy, Ellen likes to say "We bring in the science that makes the art of fundraising possible." She is the developer of the firm's flagship methodology Fundraising the SMART Way®, an evidence-based model for managing the fundraising effort on the basis of continuous improvement, and author of the e-book De-Mystifying Fundraising: Seven Steps to Fundraising Success. Ellen is a thought leader in this area, having published many articles for regional, national and global publications.

Follow Ellen on Twitter (@EllenBristol and @BristolStrategy), on Facebook (Ellen Bristol) and on LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/ellenbristol>). Phone her at 800-829-0722, ext. 1. E-mail her at ellen@bristolstrategygroup.com.