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Boards Are People, Too (Believe It Or Not)

One thing all nonprofits have in common is **The Board**.

The Board (sometimes called Board of Directors, Board of Governors, Board of Trustees, or other variations) is the appointed, volunteer group with ultimate authority over the direction of the nonprofit. It is the “governing authority”: In other words, your boss’ boss.

There are books to help educate you about the role of The Board in governing your nonprofit. In *Finding Funding*, I offer a few thoughts on the role The Board plays in the fundraising arena.

As the leaders of the organization, The Board is naturally called upon to lead by example when it comes to fundraising. And that means each member is expected to give generously based on their means and encourage others to do the same.

Occasionally, it works out that way. More often than not, however, The Board is a source of disappointment to the development office, either because certain members won’t give, or only give a token amount, and are unwilling to help in the process of



raising funds from their peers and colleagues in the community. Some view their time served on The Board as equivalent to a financial contribution.

This problem comes from a flawed set of assumptions about how we as fundraisers relate to The Board.

The first and biggest flaw is that we look at The Board as a single entity. It is not. Each board is a group of individuals, and each individual brings their own set of beliefs, assumptions, and life circumstances to their work as a volunteer willing to serve the nonprofit.

The Board does not support the organization's philanthropic efforts. *Individuals* on the board do—or don't.

Though they may serve on your board, these individuals (like all individuals) have other philanthropic interests as well, along with lives that involve things like aging parents, failing marriages, knuckleheaded children, job losses . . . you know, all the things that go into living on planet Earth.

Fundraisers who approach The Board as a monolith expected to do certain things are bound to be disappointed. In taking that approach, we miss the biggest opportunity that The Board provides: Individuals who have signed onto the mission of your nonprofit and want to be helpful.

Your job as a fundraiser is to get to know each member of your board as a person . . . to find out why they agreed to sign on to lead the organization, and what they hope to get out of it, and, most importantly, how they connect to your nonprofit's mission on an emotional level.

It's your job to treat board member as you would any other prospective donor by explaining why your nonprofit needs their philanthropic support, and to determine an appropriate ask amount (using, of course, the fantastic, all powerful, magical Gift Chart).

It is also your job to cultivate those relationships one by one, not to assume that once a person has accepted a position on your board they will automatically behave in the way you expect them to behave.

By treating board members as individuals and donors, you lead by example. When you do, it comes as no surprise when you find yourself uncovering those individuals willing to assist in connecting you to others in their social networks who might become donors as well.