



# Getting Comfortable with the F Word: Fundraising and the Nonprofit Board Member

*Here are some concrete ways to make sure your board raises the funds you need.*

BY CAROL WEISMAN

**M**any of us learned it's not polite to discuss money, that there's something obscene about the topic. The real obscenity is to tolerate poverty, disease, hunger, or a world without the arts. Money can make a big difference in attacking these fronts, which is an excellent reason to talk about it and seek more of it for your nonprofit organization.

While few people join boards because they love to raise money, the sooner they get comfortable with the concept, the better. Here goes.

Should board members donate their own funds?

Fundraising must begin at home. If board members expect the community to support their organization, they must write checks of their own. There are several reasons:

**Reason 1.** A donation should be viewed as an investment rather than a gift. With an investment, there is an expectation of a future relationship that includes dividends. When you buy stock, you follow the market to chart its progress. An investment in a nonprofit implies the same kind of involvement and vigilance.



**Does your board think money grows on trees?**



## Development staff and boards must work together like truffle hound and master.

**Reason 2.** Funders expect it. One of the first questions funders ask is whether 100 percent of board members support the organization. Why should they give their dollars if the people closest to the organization don't personally support the cause?

**Reason 3.** A third reason is to avoid hypocrisy. How can board members ask people to do something they themselves won't do? Granted, all of us can't write a seven-figure check, but all of us can write a check, even if it's only for \$5.

We have a development staff. Why should board members raise funds?

Development staff and boards must work together like truffle hound and master. One has to point out the treasure and the other has to dig it up. The roles may vary, but it has to be a team effort. If you're not going to get involved, don't waste your money hiring someone.

It takes some work for board and staff to work well together. Board members frequently don't understand the development process, and staff members may overlook some complicating factors. One thing staff members overlook is that every time board members ask for a donation, they incur debt. Their contacts will ask them to support their charities in return. There is often a quid pro quo when it comes to giving and friends.

But even if board members don't want to solicit their friends directly,

they can take the truffle-hound role and point out the money. Frank discussions of how board and staff can work together will ensure success.

How do you let board candidates know what you expect?

Board and staff leaders are often shocked that their board members don't know they're supposed to raise funds. But, when pressed, they admit they've never actually told their board that raising funds is their duty.

The truth is, many people are clueless about what board service entails. The franker your pre-membership meetings are, the less the chance that either the organization or the board member will be disappointed.

To prevent misunderstandings, write a letter of commitment, similar to the one in Figure 1. Send two copies of the letter to new board members, asking them to keep one and sign and return the second.

The nominating committee should write the specifics of the board commitment letter and then present it to the entire board for approval. This is an opportunity to get issues in the open for board members who aren't participating fully in the governance process.

The letter should be revised annually, as the needs of the nonprofit vary from year to year. Fundraising expectations will be much higher in the midst of a capital or endowment campaign. Other years, community education may take priority, requiring a different sort of board activity.

How do you change your board's giving philosophy?

Even established boards need to change their philosophy of giving from time to time. For instance, if you've always had United Way support and your community hasn't filled their coffers to the usual level, your board might have to be more aggressive to meet its budget.

What do you do when your board members have never believed that raising funds was their job? You hear "but we have a development person, don't we?" or (hear highly virtuous tone) "I give my time and time is money."

The only way to answer these statements is to come back to the mission. The question for the board is: "Can we serve our clients with the funds we have, or do we have to reduce services as a result of the shortfall?" There are only two options when there isn't enough money: raise more or reduce services. Ask, "If we reduce services, which programs are we going to cut?" In one board room, the conversation went like this:

**Executive director:** "We didn't receive a large grant we had expected. We either have to raise additional funds with the board's help or reduce services."

**Board:** Dead silence.

**Executive Director:** So, I guess we'll have to cut services. Do we drop our group for adolescent rape victims or shorten the hours of our preschool for abused toddlers? (Notice the use of the word "we".)

**Board Member:** Wait a minute, those are important services. We



### Figure 1: Board Commitment Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Thank you for agreeing to serve on the board of \_\_\_\_\_. As I'm sure you know, our mission is \_\_\_\_\_. Our vision of our organization's future is \_\_\_\_\_. We expect the following of our board members:

- Attendance policy: Our meetings are: \_\_\_\_\_ (list times, date and place).
- We have the following financial expectations of our members: \_\_\_\_\_.
- We expect your participation in the following events: \_\_\_\_\_ (list special events and the level of participation expected; for example, bring a foursome to the golf tournament, buy and bring a table to the dinner dance).
- The length of your term is \_\_\_\_\_.
- We anticipate that you will need to devote at least \_\_\_\_\_ (hours a week, month or year) to serve on this board.
- All board members are asked to serve on at least one committee. As we discussed, you will be on the \_\_\_\_\_ committee.
- To help with the orientation process and to welcome you, your board mentor (or sponsor) is \_\_\_\_\_ (include phone number).

Should you have any questions about being able to fulfill your duties, please call \_\_\_\_\_ (include phone number).

What can you expect from us? We will not waste your time. We will give you material regarding the programs and financial status of our nonprofit in a timely manner. We will not keep secrets. If there is a problem, we will let you know as soon as possible. We do (or don't) have board insurance. Please call if you would like a copy of the insurance policy.

Please sign the enclosed two copies. Keep one and send the other in.

Welcome aboard. We look forward to working with you to \_\_\_\_\_ (refer once again to the mission).

Sincerely,

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chair of Nominating Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Board President

can't cut those. How soon do we need to raise the money?

**Executive Director:** By the end of the quarter.

**Board Member:** Well, I'm willing to help. Am I the only one?

**Second Board Member:** I'll help too. If we pull together, I'm sure we can raise the money by then.

**Rest of Board:** Sure, let's get started.

For the first time, the board saw that money was tied to mission and that if they didn't get involved, children would suffer. Till then, ensuring adequate financial resources had always been the responsibility of the executive director and the development staff.

Now the earth moved and the board stepped up to the plate. Once they began to raise funds, attendance at board meetings increased. They

wanted to make sure that the funds they raised were spent wisely.

Boards have three choices: train board members to raise funds, reduce the scope of the organization's services, or get new board members. When board members are unwilling to make the transition and take responsibility for the organization's fiscal health, the board can assess what the board member brings to the table and decide



whether the value of intellectual resources, insights, or contacts makes it worthwhile for the board to keep this member.

Getting rid of board members can be easier than you might think. First of all, you need a solid board rotation system, and you have to have active, enforced bylaws. If board members are uninvolved or and don't come to meetings, maybe they don't have the time or interest to continue to serve. The trick is to have them leave as friends. Always go back to mission, and always look for another opportunity for that board member to serve within your organization.

A conversation might go something like this: "You are up for reelection to the board. We've noticed that you haven't been able to attend many meetings in the last year. We need all the help we can to \_\_\_\_ (state mission). We don't want to lose your expertise. We are hoping that you will agree to serve on the \_\_\_\_ (name committee or advisory board). That way we won't be losing the unique gifts you bring to the table and you won't be burdened by so many meetings." Then write a glowing article in your newsletter about what this person has accomplished while serving on the board and what future activities he or she plans to be involved in.

Do you want a board of all "heavy hitters?"

Sometimes we sit in a boardroom and think, "Wouldn't it be great if we had a roomful of people who could just write checks to get this done?"

Board members of affluence and influence are marvelous, but there is a down side. Without diversity at some level, you might make poor decisions.

One board built a soup kitchen to serve the poor and homeless, but it wasn't on a bus line. No one who

worked directly with clients and knew their needs was involved in the decision making.

If you do decide to have a board of only "movers and shakers," make sure you tap into their minds as well as their wallets. One group with major heavy hitters on the board was asking \$50,000 per board member and getting it. The board held only one meeting a year, which lasted three

hours. When a new development director was hired, he made it a point to get to know the board members and was astounded at the talent on the board. He said that asking only for money was like buying a huge mainframe computer and using it only to play solitaire. The more he got to know them, the easier his job became and the more money they raised.



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## Who should ask your board to give?

Asking board members to give is the job of the board—specifically the board president. At the end of the year, a letter from the president should be sent to every board member. There's no reason why staff can't draft this letter. It could read something like the letter in Figure 2.

## How else can board members financially support the mission?

There are as many ways to support a mission financially as there are board members. Frequently, members just don't know how many ways they can affect the bottom line. At a board retreat or a long board meeting, try this exercise:

Ask board members to break into groups of three. Take a large piece of paper and have them write the alphabet down one side and then ask what they can do to affect the bottom line, starting with each letter of the alphabet. Sometimes the effect is hilarious, sometimes thought provoking, but it gets the brain thinking.

Members who can't personally write big checks need to understand that they are integral members of the fundraising team. One board member asked his boss to donate his company's old computer system when the company moved. "Old" in corporate terms was two years. His employer donated the system and also asked the hardware company to donate its time to install and network the system at 72 work sites. Later, his employer went to the nonprofit to receive an award and gave even more—a large check and five laptop computers for field staff.

Another board member, who owned an asphalt company, redid a playground at a shelter for battered women. He asked his buddies and their kids to help as a Mother's Day

**Figure 2:**  
**Letter Sent to Each Board Member at the End of Each Year**

Dear Ralph,

Your help on the strategic plan was invaluable. Your merger experience in the corporate world certainly saved us from some common pitfalls.

You have been generous with your time and knowledge, and now I'm going to once again ask you to be generous with your pocketbook.

As you know, there are x,y, and z things we cannot do without additional revenue. Thanks to your work in the planning process, you of all people know that your gift will be used to get the most mission for the money. Thanks for digging deep.

It is an honor to serve with you.

Sincerely,

Sally  
Board President

project to honor everything their moms did for them. The kids got their scouting troops involved and brought new tricycles for the children who lived at the shelter.

Also, never underestimate the power of a board member who can tell a personal story. One of the greatest fundraisers of all time was a battered woman who had overcome many obstacles. She left school in eighth grade and got her G.E.D. at 35. When she went into corporations to tell her story, she always left with a significant check.

Like most board members, she needed some training in public speaking. Groups like Toastmasters and the National Speakers Association can help train your board and staff on how to deliver a powerful message.

(Hint: Never leave a speech without getting the home addresses of those in the audience for your database. Raffles or other giveaways by the host are one way to collect the

information. Or simply ask for the names and addresses of those who would like to receive your newsletter or hear more about volunteer opportunities.)

Board members can also get donations of time from their friends and colleagues. One board member called a friend who was a labor lawyer and asked for a donation of two hours of time. He agreed and eventually grew so interested in the group that he became both a contributor and a board member.

Holidays and special occasions are a great time for board members to solicit their friends and colleagues. When one woman, a breast cancer survivor, threw a bash for her 70th birthday, she asked for donations to a cancer research program. Her guests gladly wrote the checks.

Don't forget Mother's Day and Valentine's Day. For certain causes, the Fourth of July might make sense.

Ask board members to get a list of friends and colleagues and to write



a letter with a stamped envelope enclosed. Figure 3 gives an example from the divorce recovery program at Valentine's Day.

### How can board members learn to raise funds?

Many board members don't want to raise money because they don't know how. Counter that reluctance by asking: "Would you be willing to try raising funds after you've had some support and training?" It's amazing how many board members are willing to get involved if assured that they aren't going to be embarrassed.

There are many ways to get fundraising training. Your local chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) may have training available or the names of experts in your area. To find a chapter near you, you can check their Web site at [www.afpnet.org](http://www.afpnet.org).

If you are in an area without a chapter, you may want to call your United Way or Junior League to ask whether they know someone who could work with your group.

Training should be consistent with your strategic plan. If your strategy for raising funds is a capital campaign, don't hire someone to teach you to put on special events.

When setting up a training program for board members, build in a sense of safety, warmth, and encouragement, especially through those first few fundraising calls. Let them know that rejection is part of the process, that it hurts but is by no means deadly. When Nietzsche said, "That which does not kill you shall make you strong," it is clear he was talking about fundraising. Being prepared for rejection helps tremendously.

Does this sound like sales training? Well, it is. You have to know and understand "the product" you're sell-

**Figure 3: Letter for Board Members' Friends on Valentine's Day**

My dear friends,

You have helped me through a bad time in my life, and I'm asking for your help once again. As Valentine's Day approaches, think about those who are without someone who loves them and whom they love.

Just as you gave generously to me, with personal support when I needed it, I hope that you will give generously to Second Chapter, a divorce recovery program. This program helped me, as it has many others, complete the healing process.

ing, which in this case is your mission and the programs you have established to meet those ends.

Consider using your board retreat, when people are relaxed and away from their day-to-day grind, as a time for training. Start by establishing why the mission is important. Some groups emphasize this by having the retreat in the venue where they deliver services. If you are a theater company, have your retreat on the stage. If you are a school for special needs children, spend the day in a wheelchair or try to learn Braille. If you are a scouting group, consider a cookout at one of your campgrounds. Don't forget to make the s'mores. They taste as good when you're 60 as they did at 6.

Another way to bring the mission into the retreat is to have clients tell their story. If that's not possible, ask a social worker, teacher, or other line worker to present a case study. Make sure the story is about a person and not about numbers. Experience the mission.

Board members who truly understand the needs of the people they serve will understand the critical need for money to serve them. For those who make the connection, fundraising will become an integral part of their service to the mission they value. ■

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These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, 800-424-7367, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org).

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