

How to Solicit Your Board: Rules for Success

Would you like 100% of your board to give cash gifts to your organization? Here's how to do so without antagonizing your board members, or driving yourself crazy.

By Gail Perry

Getting the financial support of your board doesn't need to be a huge challenge. If you take charge behind the scenes, you can make it happen. It might be easier than you think.

It's our own fault when board members don't give 100%. We could make full board participation a reality – if we handled it correctly. The real issue is that we often don't set up their solicitations in the right way. Here's how to make the process simple and successful:

Rule One: Show why board members need to give generously.

The importance of board member participation in giving is rarely explained properly to members. Instead, the issue of their giving is apologized for, snuck up on, or swept under the rug.

Make the philosophy clear. When the reasoning for their giving is established in an open and straightforward way by board leaders, then staff can cheerfully and enthusiastically talk about it.

Rule Two: Be totally clear about expectations.

Say what's expected, in both written and spoken form. And be sure board members themselves agree on the expectations.

Spell out giving expectations in your board enlistment materials and in the commitment letter that members sign when they join. Make sure that the commitment to give is written in plain English, in black and white, for everyone to see.

Don't stop there, however: You and your board leaders must also talk out loud about it, and often.

Rule Three: Set the ask up correctly: Get board members to solicit other board members.

Never get in the situation of asking your board members yourself. It's an impossible situation. You may be seen as asking for too many favors as it is.

In situations like these, it actually does get a bit like "begging." The conversation turns to being one about "money," rather than about vision.



It's hard for you as a staff member to have a conversation with your board members about their giving without it lapsing into the wrong tone. Let the board members be in charge of this. (But you run things behind the scenes.)

Rule Four: Give the subject of board donations lots of visibility.

Put the issue in front of them often and clearly. Report regularly on the status of board gifts. Put pledge cards and return envelopes in every board member's packet. They're a great reminder.

Set a deadline. Say, "We need all board gifts to be in by March 30." That gives you – or your board chair – an excuse to be in touch to follow up.

Remember that your board members are extremely busy people. Sometimes they may simply have forgotten. They need to be cheerfully reminded.

Rule Five: Take charge of the process yourself.

Don't be shy. Or passive. You won't get 100% board participation unless you arrange for it to happen. You need to direct the entire effort like a quarterback behind the scenes.

Do not – repeat – do not leave it to chance. If you do, you're likely to end up with a lackluster performance by your board, less than full participation, and a demoralized staff.

But direct everything quietly – with the board chair or the development committee chair as the front person. Let them do the talking and signing of letters. Your role is to write the letters, give the board chair talking points, be sure it's on the agenda repeatedly, promote the conversation, publish frequent reports on board gifts to date, and thank the board members early and often for their generosity.

Make it happen. But hide behind a board member so it is not all coming from you.

“Put pledge cards in every board member's packet.”

“It’s our own fault when board members don’t give 100%.”

Rule Six: Give board members lots of credit and acknowledgment.

Remember the power of positive reinforcement. Reward the behaviors you want to develop, and those behaviors will show up more often.

We have to realize that board members typically don’t get much thanks or acknowledgment at all. Give credit for all the resources board members bring in – corporate, foundation, in-kind, government. Every gift of resources of any type from a board member should be an occasion of joy and celebration. Giving ample thanks makes them all feel great and successful.

Remember that success breeds success. Create an environment of abundance, rather than scarcity, in your handling of board contributions. Make the board members feel they’re creating abundance, even if you aren’t so sure. Creating the feeling will help make the reality happen.

Rule Seven: Tie the board’s gifts directly to your program results.

Let the board members know what they’re accomplishing through their gifts, just as you do with all donors. Give them meaningful information on the results they’ve created.

Show a cause-and-effect link between better fundraising results and better daily operations. It will encourage your

Three Things Not to Do

- 1. Don’t personally solicit them.** Never put yourself in the position of soliciting your board members. Remember the fundamental rule of peer-to-peer solicitation: When it comes time to solicit the board, get out of the way and have someone else do it.
- 2. Don’t apologize or let your board chair apologize.** Too many board chairs apologize when they bring up the subject of board giving. They’re not definitive about what is expected or encouraging about giving. They’re so nervous about this issue that they soften up their manner. They look down and around instead of making eye contact with other board members.
If you doubt that your board chair can make a clear, emphatic, and direct oral request to the board about the importance and necessity of full financial participation, then find another board member to make this speech. It is up to you to make this happen.
- 3. Don’t complain.** People want to be part of success. They don’t want to be part of failure. Moaning, groaning, feeling sorry for yourself, and hand wringing in any form are not allowed.

You won’t change the world without a positive attitude. Expect the best from your board, and you’ll get the best.

board members to be more active in raising funds and in giving personally.

If you can get them enthusiastic about what they’re accomplishing through their work and their personal gifts, you’ll have lots more money coming from them. Like all donors, they experience joy when they see the results of their gifts. Use words such as these:

- “With your leadership, support, and financial contributions, we were able to accomplish X.”
- “The generous gifts from board members allowed us to go even further to do Y.”
- The board’s gifts made all the difference in our ability to reach Z.”

These are the magic words that board members (and donors) love to hear. Good luck to you – and your (generous) board! 



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You Can Make It Happen

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- Reciprocal Board Agreements: What Do Board Members Give? What Do They Receive in Return?** (Vol. 28, No. 1)
- How to Talk to Your Board** (Vol. 23, No. 1)
- Does 100% Board Giving Matter?** (Vol. 35, No. 1)
- Board and Staff Consensus: A Powerful Fundraising Tool** (Vol. 15, No. 1)
- Turn Your Board Members into Strong Owners** (Vol. 28, No. 2)
- Why You Need a Prenuptial Agreement** (Vol. 13, No. 1)
- How to Create a Strong Board-CEO Partnership** (Vol. 27, No. 1)
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