



From Bored to Blazing: Fire Up Your Board

Give these ideas a try and watch people wake up.

By Gail Perry

Have your board members lost their enthusiasm and zip? Have they lost their energy to create change? Many board members really do care but aren't involved or engaged.

You can change this situation, and you'll make your board members happier as a result. Here's my recipe for creating change, renewing enthusiasm, and firing up these lovely people who care so much about your cause.

1. Ask Them to Share Their Personal Stories.

Board members are serving on your board for a reason. It's probably a deep personal – even emotional – connection with your mission.

Do you ever talk about it? Probably not. Bring up the subject. Ask them why they care. What's their personal connection to the cause? It's such a simple question and it can touch the

heart, open the floodgates of energy and commitment, and bring people to tears.

Tip: Go around the table and ask people to share their stories. Have them consider what they would say if someone asked, "Why do you care enough to serve on that organization's board?" Listening to others and remembering their own stories will reawaken their passion.

2. Help Them Understand Where the Money Is Going.

Real numbers can be very motivating for board members. Set up these discussion questions:

- **Why do we need to spend money** on this or that?
- **Why does it cost** so much?
- **How much does it cost** to help one kid, clean one stream, present one performance, or whatever your cause is?

And the most important question your board needs to focus on is this:

- **What do we need the most** but don't have money for?

Tip: Once you help them understand the urgent work and why it needs to happen, they may be dashing out the door to ask everyone they know to help. (I've seen it happen.)

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3. Connect Them to Your Real Work.

Alas, so many board meetings are stuck in dry business discussions — far away from the urgent, tough work in the field, on the stage, in the lab, in the classroom. No wonder passionate, well-meaning board members feel estranged from the real mission of your nonprofit.

Take them out of the office and get them in the field. Give them a direct, personal experience of the amazing change you're creating in the world.

Arrange some mission moments — opportunities for board members to see and experience personally your organization's wonderful work. You'll see a sea change in their attitude, commitment, enthusiasm, and engagement levels.

Tip: Cancel your next board meeting and take them on a field trip instead. Or bring in clients to describe how their lives have been changed by your organization's work.

4. Liven Up Your Meetings.

Ah, the boring board meeting. Listening passively to presentation after presentation. Death by Powerpoint sometimes. There's no interesting discussion. Or if there is a compelling discussion, it's often on a topic that's trivial. Yes, we've all been there!

Reorganize your agenda to put the boring stuff last rather than first. Make committee reports only two minutes each. Create a consent agenda (a list of items mailed out in advance and approved in one vote.) Give your board chair training in meeting facilitation.

Tip: Check out “Twelve Ways to Liven Up Your Board Meetings — And Your Board” (Vol. 36, No. 3) at NonprofitWorld.org.

5. Give Board Members What They Want.

What do board members want? In *The Truth about What Nonprofit Boards Really Want* (wiley.com), June Bradham describes research showing that board members want to:

- **Work with people** who are as passionate and excited about the organization as they are.
- **Feel that their time** is used wisely.
- **Get their hands dirty** with real work.
- **Meet and get to know** the other board members.

Tip: Give your board members meaningful work that will actually help your organization. It will give them a terrific experience, and you'll be rewarded with excitement and enthusiasm.

6. Give Them Social Time.

If one of the top things board members want is to meet the other board members, you need to arrange time for that to happen. That's why coffees and lunches before and after meetings are so important.


Social time fosters close relationships, creating trust among the people who run your nonprofit. What could be more important?

Tip: Build optional social time into your regular meeting agenda.

7. Focus Them on Action Items.

What do your board members need to “do” in order to be good board members? Simply attend meetings and offer their judgment and opinions? No, it's more than that. They need to be equipped with actions they're supposed to take.

Whether it's calling five donors to say thank you, or introducing five new people to your organization, or selling five tickets, or opening the door to an important connection, or advocating for your nonprofit at a community forum, or researching roofers so you can get a new roof donated — there's a lot they can do.

Tip: Send board members out the door with a clear idea of what they need to do between now and the next board meeting. 

Gail Perry, MBA, CFRE, is the best-selling author of Fired-Up Fundraising: Turn Board Passion into Action. This article is adapted from her blog at gailperry.com.

Keep the Energy Flowing

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Using Board Portals to Keep Directors Connected (Vol. 29, No. 3)

Twelve Ways to Liven Up Your Board Meetings — And Your Board (Vol. 36, No. 3)

Board Problems Reflected in Training Requests (Vol. 33, No. 1)

How to Assess and Improve Your Board's Performance (24, No. 1)

What Nonprofit CEOs Really Think of Their Boards (Vol. 33, No. 2)

Success through Engaged High-Level Board Members (Vol. 34, No. 1)

How to Present Training Workshops that Educate and Inspire (Vol. 29, No. 4)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance (snpo.org/li).