

Train Board Members to Tell Your Organization's Story

Use these exercises to help board members talk authentically, coherently, and effectively about your organization's work.

By Gail Perry

Have you trained board members in storytelling yet? Sometimes we forget about this hugely important issue. But the fact is, most board members simply don't know what to say when they have the opportunity to talk about your organization.

Board members must have training and practice to help them come up with the right stories and share them out in the community. And then, just think what an asset you'll have!

When board members start telling their own stories, magic can happen. They come alive when they talk about why they care so much about your cause.

You can empower them by giving them some terrific exercises, conversations, and training. You'll activate their enthusiasm for the cause *and* for fundraising. When you arm them with stories, you'll be putting them to work in ways that allow them to be productive – and even have some fun. Here are five types of stories that board members need to be able to tell – with exercises to support them.

Why do I care?

Have you asked your board members lately why they care about your cause? You know, board members don't often get a chance to talk about why they care. And many board members have deeply personal reasons for caring. They may have burning stories that are part of family legacy, their own history, or the struggles of people they know. These are their personal stories – where they re-discover their deepest connection to your work.

The following exercise is a great way to start a board retreat. It will elicit lots of stories. This exercise has five steps:

Ask your board members to think about why they care about your cause. What would they say if someone asked them?

Tell them to find a partner in the room and get ready to share their story.

Give each partner 30 seconds to share the story of why they care.

“Most board members don't know what to say when they have the opportunity.”

“They come alive when they talk about why they care.”

Then say “Change partners!” and let them do this again with a new partner.

Run through four or five sets of partners so board members can get lots of practice.

Why should someone contribute to your organization?

After the mingle exercise described above, put board members in small groups of three to five people. Ask them to work as a group and come up with five reasons why someone should contribute to your organization.

You'll be amazed at the stories board members come up with when they discuss this question. How wonderful to hear your board members telling each other how important your cause is and why it deserves support! Suddenly fundraising doesn't seem so scary to them.

Who has your organization helped?

Every board member needs a simple, three-sentence story about a real person impacted by your nonprofit. It can be a kid, an animal, a family, a single mother, a grandmother, whoever. A three-sentence story can go like this:

- There was this kid who . . . (situation).
- And here's what happened next: . . . (drama – crisis).
- And we were able to help them this way . . . (happy ending).

Work with them in small groups on this.

What are we raising money for?

Set this up as a panel discussion with several leaders – the executive director and top program officers, for example. Interview your panel and generate a discussion between the board members and your professional staff. Ask questions like these:

What's our top program area and about how much does it cost?

Why does it cost so much?



“Every board member needs a simple, three-sentence story to share.”

Where exactly does the money go?

Why does it take so much staff to do this work?

How many people are we helping in this program? About how much does it cost per person helped (or per center that you operate or other measure relevant to your operation)?

Why do we even need private contributions anyway?

What else does this program really need? And how much would that cost?

How many people are we missing, and what happens to them if we can't help them?

Can you tell me a story of someone whose life was changed through this project?


What would we do if we had an additional \$100k? (or \$50k, or \$500k or a million – whatever is relevant to your budget size).

This exercise takes fundraising away from “money” and makes it about something real. It's extremely powerful. You should run this exercise with your board members at least once a year.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if ...?

“Wouldn't it be wonderful” stories are about vision and possibility. Ask board members to share their ideas of what wonderful things could happen if your organization was successful doing its amazing work.

This is a great exercise to use at the end of a workshop or retreat. It's a powerful visioning exercise and brings things to a close on a positive note.

When board members share their vision for what your organization could accomplish, they're re-igniting their own passion as they speak. You'll see their eyes start to shine. When you equip your board members with this kind of storytelling, they're engaged and enthusiastic – and ready to go to work! 

Gail Perry Group inspires nonprofits around the world with cutting-edge fundraising strategies and new tools to make fundraising more successful and more fun. Find smart strategies to help you raise tons of money at gailperrygroup.com.



Stories Are Magic

Stories boost morale, bond people, and provide the excitement and energy people need to do their work. Stories are fun. They're emotional. They evoke passion. They motivate people from the heart. They arouse people's interest as nothing else does. Learn more about harnessing the magic of stories and the enthusiasm of your board in these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

How Can You Create a Good Story to Help Raise Funds? (Vol. 42, No. 1)

Three Vital Questions for Your Board (Vol. 36, No. 1)

Revitalize Your Thank-You Letter with a Good Story (Vol. 37, No. 2)

From Bored to Blazing: Fire Up Your Board (Vol. 37, No. 3)

Increase Support with the Six-Step Storytelling Formula (Vol. 42, No. 3)

Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

Five Golden Rules for Board-Executive Retreats (Vol. 26, No. 1)

You Have a Story to Tell (Vol. 25, No. 1)

How to Add an Emotional Hook to Your Fundraising Letters (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Telling the Story: Exploring Clients' Lives (Vol. 17, No. 1)