

Donor Empathy: don't leave your board in the dark

In the first instalment of this series, Brian Holmes noted that fear of asking is one of the greatest impediments to engaging Board members in fundraising. In part 2, Craig Gravestain, co-director at Xponential Philanthropy, argues that the failure of fundraisers to understand what motivates their Board members is equally detrimental.

In Australia, non-profit Board members are generally resistant to personally asking for big gifts supporting the causes they represent. Many are downright dead scared of the prospect of asking. Some have asked so many people they feel their welcome mat is worn. For others, there is the real fear of reciprocity from their peer.

Board members need to be incorporated into the fundraiser's pipeline, starting with the task of making them aware of the need for funds, educating them about what the funds are used for and cultivating their personal interest; just like we would any other probable donor. Too much may be assumed, including that our Board members are passionate for our cause, or organisation.

The fundraising team has a key role to play in nurturing the culture of giving among the Board, yet many fundraisers fall short in this challenge. This begs the question: *if Board members should be donors, why do so many fundraisers fail to treat them as such?*

The only way to begin to engage your Board members is to understand what motivates them to serve your organisation: just as you would a key donor. To do this, you need to spend time with them to discover the personal story behind their passion for your cause.

This can be problematic in very large organisations where Board members are hands-off. If so, we need to work the totem pole to ensure that whoever does has the authority, is working with the Board. In the same sense that we often enlist a third party to advocate for a big gift from a donor, you may also need to do that within your own organisation.

Once you have an appreciation of what drives a Board member's passion, you can begin to develop a relationship of trust that is critical as you move to engage them more intimately in the fundraising process. Be realistic though with motivations of Duty, Legislation or Appointment which may undercut any personal passion for the cause. Conserve your energy for those who would give if they were informed and

educated about the cause they govern.

To this end, ensure that Board members receive your donor communications, with your personalised note. *(They should know what it feels like to be one of your donors.)* Give them the opportunity to meet and mix with your key donors. *(They may in time be inspired that your fundraising team has the confidence of supporters of such calibre.)*

And long before they confront the fear of asking, one of the best tools you have is to let them experience the joy of thanking!

Start by giving your Board Members two or three VIP donors to call and thank personally. Make sure they are either your most significant and/or your most regular donors.

These conversations both affirm the value of your donor and the value of the organisation to the Board member. The exercise also acts as a positive reinforcement of the donor relationship.

Once your Board member begins to appreciate the value of the donor relationship, and to understand the donor mindset, they are more likely to be comfortable introducing their own networks to the organisation. This is the critical first step in peer-to-peer fundraising.

Yet encouraging a culture of giving, and even involving your Board members in the thanking process, is not enough. Board members need – indeed deserve – training in fundraising, and in the prospect engagement process in particular.

I have presented countless non-profit Board workshops over the years, it is part of the services that Xponential provide across Australia and New Zealand, and in my experience, the greatest resistance

Board members have to the fundraising process is the fear that they will be asked-to-ask. It's that fear of the unknown that Brian Holmes spoke to in the first instalment of this series.

Through proper training, Board members come to realise that they can contribute significantly to the fundraising goals of the organisation without ever making an ask.

- They can contribute by helping to identify prospective donors, from within their personal and professional networks.
- They can help to 'open doors' that you, the fundraiser, can't.
- They can become vocal, influential advocates for your cause.
- They can help to cultivate prospective donors by attending events and sharing their personal testimony regarding why they are so passionate about your cause.
- As influential volunteers, they can attend key prospect meetings to help move the donor engagement process forward.

Each one of these engagements with your Board member helps to demystify the fundraising process.

That is the key to engaging Board members in your fundraising. For when a Board member overcomes the fear of the unknown, knows what they are asking for and how to ask, they are empowered to assist your cause. (Some have even been known to enjoy, rather than dread, making the ask!)

For more information on Xponential Philanthropy Board Engagement workshops and seminars email success@xponential.com.au or in Australia phone 1300 656 931 and in New Zealand phone 0800 000 955.

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