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What Role do Boards and Individual Board Members have in Nonprofit Fundraising?

Len Al Haas | *Consulting Insights, September 2011*

Fundraising is one of the major responsibilities of a nonprofit board of directors/trustees.

Other responsibilities include governance, setting policies and determining the strategic direction of the organization, including approval of their organization's strategic plan. A central concern of the board is ensuring that the organization has the resources necessary to pursue the strategic plan. It is also the board's fiduciary obligation to see that resources are properly used. Most important, boards are entrusted with advancing the mission of their organization and serving as representatives of the community (the community can be considered a nonprofit's shareholders).

The board's role in fundraising is to provide leadership, financial support, and connection to donors and potential donors. The board must be structured to meet the primary needs of the organization. And it needs to be prepared to effectively pursue the fundraising goals it establishes in support of the organization. The board works in conjunction with the staff to bring great influence and strength in support of the organizations broader fundraising plan with the staff driving the day-to-day execution of most activities. Typically, the boards of organizations with significant, ongoing fundraising needs have a standing committee for resource development. Such committees should be chaired by and include board members (although not necessarily exclusively). Like other board committees, a fundraising committee functions as the formal mechanism through which plans are developed and brought to the board for approval and execution.

While the fundraising/development committee may have the more formal and focused responsibilities, all board members have an important role to play. Preparation for fundraising is greatly aided when all board members participate in the planning process, reading and providing feedback on development of the case for support, understanding the development strategies being planned, and understanding their collective and individual roles.

Advocating on behalf of an organization is an important early part of the fundraising process. Board members bring two critical forms of leverage to the process: reach into the community through their own spheres of influence and the collective volume of their connections. Board members should look for opportunities to introduce others to their organization and to educate them about the importance of the mission. As advocates, board members should always be ready to tell the story of the organization and articulate the main points of case for support. It is not necessary for board members to walk around with every detail and statistic. A few key statistics and a story or two illustrating the good work of their organization, combined with the board member's passion are more than enough to initially engage the prospect.

While there are many opportunities for individual board members to participate in fundraising, they can be most effective in securing major gifts. As leaders for whom the nonprofit organization is a priority, board members begin all fundraising efforts with their best prospects - themselves. Understanding that in the nonprofit arena time is NOT money, board members make their cash gift first in order to be comfortable asking others to do the same. Is it realistic to expect others to do something that you are not willing to do yourself?

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Board members begin all fundraising efforts with their best prospects - themselves.

Board members who cite time as their gift are in a good position to ask others for time. Time does not pay staff, utilities or the other hard expenses required to operate the organization. An individual who gives time is a volunteer. An individual who gives money is a donor. A board member must be both a volunteer and a donor.

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Volunteers can make excellent fundraisers not only because of their knowledge of the organization, but also because of their relatively pure motivations. The success of their nonprofit benefits them no more than any other shareholder (member of the community). With respect to fundraising, board members are a special type of volunteer, holding responsibility for the conduct of the organization. While volunteers may have passion and feel ownership, they cannot be held accountable for the direction of their nonprofits.

Staff can support, manage and thereby leverage volunteer efforts. Because key staff are familiar with the day-to-day operations and details of their organization's program, they make excellent partners in the fundraising process. A passionate board member and a knowledgeable staff member are rarely faced with a question they cannot answer.

A board that is well-prepared and passionate about the mission of the organization is essential to successful fundraising.

Leading by example and reaching out to others in the community to garner support for their organization's goals not only helps secure funding, but also attracts additional volunteers. Ultimately a thriving board that regularly recruits new leadership will maintain the strength of the organization.

For more information, contact Cindy Cheatham, VP Consulting Services at consulting@gcn.org or 678-916-3082 or complete our [online form](#).



MAIN OFFICE 100 Peachtree Street, Suite 1500, Atlanta, GA 30303
PHONE 678.916.3000 or 800.959.5015 **FAX** 404.521.0487
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