

Not-for-Profit Industry

What Does the “B” Word (“Boards”) Have to Do With Successful Fundraising? Quite a Lot

In the nonprofit world, one topic causes more anxiety, angst, and teeth-gnashing than all others combined. We are talking about boards. And you are tensing up right now, just thinking about the topic, right? Odds are, you have had your share of board-related headaches (alongside—we hope—some productive, effective, and satisfying relationships with your organization’s board members).

The uneasy relationship between professional fundraisers and nonprofit boards is not a new problem. How many nonprofits have been greeted with groans, nervous glances, and disappearing board members at the mere mention of active engagement with fundraising?

Here is the rub: While board members understand that fundraising is a key piece of an organization’s fiscal health... When it comes to actually doing the fundraising as active participants, things fall apart.

There are a few reasons board members do not like to fundraise or do not feel confident fundraising. Fundamentals, tools, and training are all crucial.

But it is also time to start examining WHO’S on your nonprofit board. It is an integral component for healthy board governance and a successful, sustainable fundraising partnership.

Now is the time to move past old beliefs and myths. Example: that the ideal board is composed of celebrities and megadonors. (It is an easy trap: After all, if people with wealth and wealthy friends are involved, wouldn’t that solve all organizational financial woes?)



Your board is not just a list of names. You need volunteer leaders who are committed to your mission and ready to actually do some work. It does not mean megadonors and celebrities wouldn’t or can’t. But their schedules and other commitments may prevent them from being fully present to take on the responsibilities you really need from your board members.

So who and what DO you need on your nonprofit board?

1. TALENT & SKILLS

Look at your strategic plan and reflect on your upcoming needs. Start by using a [gap assessment](#) to quantify the skills and representations you have now, what is missing, and what you need to be successful in years ahead. Look at skills like legal, financial, marketing, fundraising (there it is again), and programmatic expertise that are essential for your organization’s success.

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2. REPUTATION

An article in the [New York Times](#) depicted boycotts and protests at several major arts institutions here and abroad. Protesters called for the resignation of board members who own companies that have engaged in questionable business practices and families who have skirted close to the edge of controversy. Here is a perfect example of the visible role boards play in your nonprofit’s credibility—and fundraising potential. As your nonprofit assesses and recruits your board, do you look for potential reputational risks to the organization?

3. REPRESENTATION

Maybe most important, evaluate whether your board is representative of the communities you serve and the funders who support you.

Gender, equity, diversity, and inclusion is still an issue that needs to be more effectively incorporated into the nonprofit sector—so much so that it warranted its own chapter in the recent Rogare Critical Fundraising Report (USA). Nonprofit boards, staff, and donors do not current reflect the American population or the nonprofit community. [Anne Wallestad, president of Board Source, says](#), “Boards should be a place where diversity thrives. Their structure enables them to tap into a wide range of experience, expertise, and networks. When organizations populate themselves in a way that is homogeneous, they are narrowing their boards’ worldview in a way that can be deeply problematic.”

Improving diversity on boards is still a sector-wide issue, and one that is still not a priority. According to BoardSource’s [2017 Leading With Intent](#), “Ninety-six percent of nonprofit leaders say that diversifying their board of directors is important, but only 24 percent of boards have taken steps to do so.”

CONSIDER THIS

[Blackbaud Institute’s Diversity in Giving report in 2015](#) found that African Americans and Hispanics, in particular, are underrepresented among donors. And that they reported less frequent solicitations than other groups. But that they also reported a likelihood to give more if asked more often. Other studies show that these same groups give more than white donors as a percentage of income. We know from the research that people of color and women tend to be more generous than white, male donors. So, why, for example, are our nonprofit boards still 85 percent white?

Lack of diversity on our boards means not having a true range of representation, experiences, and perspectives on our boards and among our leadership. And it might also be a missed opportunity to grow revenue from those very donors we are overlooking or not attracting.

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If you are still not convinced that examining your current and future board through these lenses is worth the time, here is another angle: Who is on your board really can influence your ability and inability to raise funds. Charitable giving in the U.S. has been stuck at 2 percent of the GDP for at least 10 years (at least). Changes are required to move the dial. As Barbara O'Reilly's colleague, Ashley Belanger, asserts in her chapter of the Rogare report, maybe if nonprofits start recruiting, cultivating, and nurturing boards that meet their REAL needs, nonprofits can create the change they want to see. Nonprofits can diversify their donor base and reap the rewards of leadership teams that are working with them in the trenches, skilled, deeply dedicated to the work of growing and sustaining your mission, and truly representative.

Name-on-a-list, minimally engaged, homogenous boards are no longer enough. What can YOU do this year to help build a board fitted to fulfilling your mission, fundraising and all?

The preceding is an article by [Barbara O'Reilly](#), CFRE, who has more than 25 years of annual fund, major gifts, and campaign fundraising experience at major nonprofit organizations, including Harvard University, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Oxford University in England, and the American Red Cross.

Contact Us

If you would like to discuss how Cole, Newton & Duran's not-for-profit team can help your organization with its tax, accounting, or consulting needs, please feel free to give me a call.

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