Board Fundraising: Give or Get?

The question “Do you apply the ‘give or get’ rule with your board or are they asked to do both?” was posted by a member of our Nonprofit ED/CEO LinkedIn community. Below are selected answers to this question from this conversation, which offer guidance to other nonprofit leaders considering their board member’s financial commitments to their organizations.

Jennifer, ED

Although individual donations comprise less than 1 percent of our $2-million annual budget and our board members do no fundraising for the organization, all board members are asked to make an annual donation so that we can report 100 percent board member support to potential foundation funders that ask that question.

Lynda, ED

We are a very small organization and, therefore, rely very heavily on our board in our fundraising efforts. We do have a minimum give or get requirement for the board, though we have had some difficulty in defining what constitutes a get, since all members are also expected to participate in fundraising events throughout the year. (So if anyone has any thoughts on that, it would be much appreciated!) I think the decision probably depends on the size and culture of the organization. A smaller organization like ours is more likely to need the board’s participation in the “get” process, whereas a larger organization or one with more established and consistent funding sources may not need the same kind of board participation. In general, we have found that the give or get option has allowed our members to identify the mode of contribution that best capitalizes on their strengths, and that has opened a lot of doors for us.

Karen, Director

I had not heard of the “give or get” concept, but I think it sounds worthwhile. Our board members are asked to give each year. Some balk at the idea. Some would rather donate time on special projects using their individual talents. I appreciate all of their efforts and really dislike asking them for financial contributions. We have a fair amount of board turnover. It is so difficult to acquire committed board members who will attend meetings faithfully that I hesitate to place roadblocks to attracting good people. We are located in a small town and our organization is small (less than $250,000 annual budget).

Scott, ED

In the job description for members of our board of directors it says, “assist in fundraising efforts” and “be a financial supporter at an appropriate level.” Both statements are a little too weak for me, but when I suggested some stronger language they shot it down. When board members talk about fundraising I remind them that the budget includes a community donation line item. Since they approved the budget it would therefore be a little hypocritical for them to expect the community to give and not give themselves.
Tim, Nonprofit Consulting

One board I belong to has an explicit requirement for annual contributions from the full board. We make this, attendance, and committee service very clear in the recruitment process. We also make it clear that there is no minimum contribution. The ED or board chair does have to make a few reminder calls in November, but otherwise we've had 100 percent for decades. It's just part of the culture.

Another board has no giving requirement other than membership in the organization.

Interestingly enough, the former organization, which has board members from all over the world, tends to have nearly 100 percent attendance at board meetings. The latter, where the farthest board member lives 25 miles away, has attendance at about 70 percent.

In working with client organizations I recommend that there be a comprehensive "history, traditions, and expectations" component to board recruitment. Contributions, fundraising, attendance, recruiting their replacements (or not) should all be explained before joining the board. I feel that a personal contribution should be mandatory, even if it's just a token amount. I also think that some, but not necessarily all, board members should participate in fundraising if that's a part of the budget. That might mean having their company sponsor events, major gift solicitations, or funder meetings—as long as they know from day one that that is one of the reasons that they were asked to serve.