

# The Golden Rule of Board Engagement

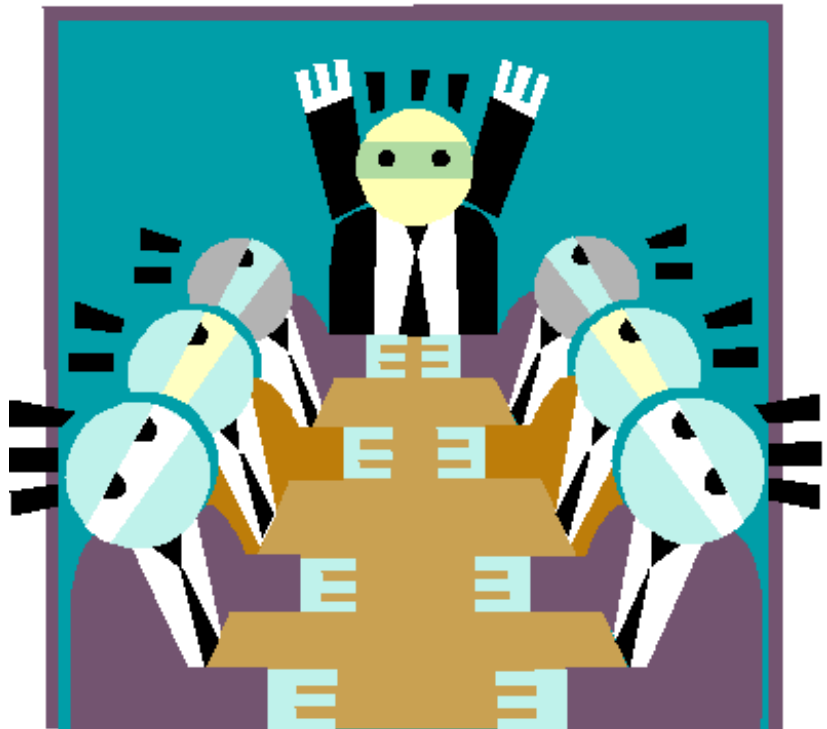
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By Barbara Maduell

“Our board is so engaged in fundraising, we can’t imagine how they could possibly do more.”

Wait ... what? Why is it so rare to hear nonprofit leaders making this kind of statement? Well, it’s because very few people think their board members are doing enough to attract, retain, and deepen the commitment of major donors. According to the oft-quoted [Underdeveloped: A National Study of Challenges Facing Nonprofit Fundraising](#), depending on organizational budget, only 18-35% of respondents said board members were “sufficiently” engaged, while 0-7% said they were “very sufficiently” engaged. One development director likely speaks for many peers when she said:



*It is really, really difficult to motivate the board and get them to see the value of what we do. We have people who renew their term, but these are the very same people who will not pick up the phone, will not attend board meetings, will not come to a donor meeting or partner with the executive director, which is a huge, huge obstacle.*

Whenever I hear comments like these, my first question is to ask about board giving – and not just if they give, but how their gifts are solicited. Because there’s one simple rule that, when applied well, can dramatically increase board involvement in fundraising:

**If you want board members to engage *with* major donors, engage them as major donors.**

Think of it as the Golden Rule, Fundraising Edition. No matter how many trainings, tools, and resources you provide, board members will not fully understand the value of donor-centered conversations and other touches *until they experience them firsthand*. This is not a trait unique to board members; it’s how all humans learn. Consider *showing, not telling* board members why their participation in the work of major gifts promises such a strong return on investment.

**Cultivation**

Is making a gift one of the very first things you ask a new board member to do? While it's true that 100% board giving should be a built-in expectation, if you treat their donations as a "given," you're missing out on a huge chance to show them how to reach for that personal, meaningful stretch gift. Take the time to ask new members why they chose to serve, what excites them about your program, and what more they want to know. In turn, they'll understand that fundraising is a journey that leads up to, rather than begins and ends with, "the ask."

### **Solicitation**

Are your board members handed pledge forms and envelopes at a meeting, and told to return them as soon as possible? Or maybe they just get a letter in the mail? While collective board giving matters to other donors, remember that your board's commitment is deeply personal. Have face-to-face meetings with each board member, assign solicitation teams, and determine request amounts with the care and strategy you would use for your top donors. They'll grow to understand that donor conversations are much more about shared values, hopes, and dreams for the community, and much less about dollars and cents.

### **Stewardship**

Are your board members regularly thanked for their specific contributions of time and money? While they may be close to the organization, every board member will still be grateful to hear about the impact of their giving. Consider developing a stewardship plan that includes quarterly touches from your senior executive, development director, board chair, and the Development Committee chair if you have one. A board member who has received a thoughtful note is more likely to understand the significance of signing or sending one.

So that's the secret: treat board members like you'd like them to treat major donors. The results will be "golden!"

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