

Telling Board Members To Give, Get, or Get Lost!

We know of a number of institutions and organizations where board members are politely asked to leave if they don't make a monetary contribution. (Or, they're not invited back for another term.)

This can be an effective use of peer pressure, especially when exerted from the board chair. If your organization is lucky enough to have this type of leadership at the top, then congratulations! It is usually a board chair that understands not-for-profit board management and tells his/her colleagues "to give, get, or get lost."

Granted, this approach can seem harsh. But, query: should it become a goal for more nonprofits? Serving on a board should be a selfless expression of wanting to help an organization and its constituents. Some trustees need to be educated and frequently re-educated on this concept.

Let's look at some quick ways to encourage your board members to contribute more than just time and expertise to your organization – let's also secure the gift. Even though you have listed this responsibility in your trustee job description, we often find ourselves having to remind board members of their financial responsibilities.

1. For current board members, schedule a board retreat and review the responsibilities for membership. The board chair should state that financial contributions are required. In fact, hand out a pledge card that can be completed and turned in at the end of the day. It's always helpful if your board chair is making a leadership level gift; he/she can then challenge every other trustee to match it.
2. Update and/or create trustee job descriptions. Make contributing the first responsibility, **bolded** or in CAPITAL LETTERS! Wording such as "Make an annual leadership gift" is appropriate. Determine in advance what amount defines a leadership gift.
3. Retain a facilitator for board retreats and possibly a fund raising consultant who can lay down the law for the board and its members. At a board meeting it is appropriate for the consultant to boldly state that board membership entails a financial commitment, and suggest that board members are only hurting the organization by not giving. Fund raising consultants have ample experience in grant writing and can offer many examples of funders not willing to support an organization simply because there is not 100% support from trustees. You are paying the consultant for his/her outside, objective, voice and expertise; let the consultant say what needs to be said.
4. Check with your not-for-profit competitors and determine what their level of board support is. Calculate the benchmark for your community and challenge your trustees to exceed it. If there is a certain amount of ego involved on the part of trustees, play to it. If they find out that their colleagues at another organization are doing a better job, it may be the kick they need to get with the program.

5. Consider setting term limits for board members. This will enable you to remove non-supportive trustees after a period of time. Those that are supportive can be placed in an emeritus group, and still be involved in making recommendations to the board. Also, supportive trustees from this group can be re-elected to the board after sitting out one term. By no means do we support lifetime membership for any board. It is not healthy for the board, and especially not productive for your organization.

Sometimes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Be proactive in the recruitment of trustees: tell them their responsibilities before they are voted upon for membership, consider having them sign trustee “contracts” upon election, and cover the responsibilities of the position at your new member orientation. And, certainly, post their job descriptions in their board member notebooks.

The bottom line: Don't let board members get involved without putting their money where their mouths are!