



## AFP Information Exchange

Getting Your Board Members to Give,  
Get or Get Off  
*A Best Practices Report from  
Bristol Strategy Group*

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## **Getting Your Board Members to Give, Get or Get Off** *A Best Practices Report from Bristol Strategy Group*

### **GETTING YOUR BOARD MEMBERS TO GIVE, GET OR GET OFF**

Of all the questions we get asked about board service, this one is probably the most frequent: how do I get my board members to donate money? Sometimes it's framed like this: what's a good give-or-get policy? Not so long ago, I met a member of an effective local board, and he told me that he and his fellow board members run their board on what he called the "3G Philosophy – Give, Get, or Get Off!"

This report explores a way to frame the conversation about your board's give-or-get policy so that you can gain consensus from all board members and come to a satisfactory conclusion.

### **DEFINING TERMS: WHAT IS A GIVE-OR-GET POLICY ANYWAY?**

It's pretty simple. Your board members agree to either donate (give) a certain amount of money every year, paid for out of their own personal resources. Or they agree to raise the equivalent amount from others (get). Depending on the monetary level you choose, the "give or get" amount might be just enough money to buy a table for eight at a gala event. On the other hand, it might be \$25,000. The amount is up to the board members and should not be dictated by the staff. Although, staff people, please feel free to add your opinions and recommendations about the size.

### **OK, BUT WHAT IF...?**

Now that we've defined our terms, this is when people start to throw out exceptions to the rule. But what if I can't afford it? But what if we bring indigent people on board? But what if (it's Tuesday, there's a thunderstorm, or any number of other excuses.)

Policies and procedures are designed to manage the majority of situations, not every possible exception. If it's appropriate for your board to include representatives of disadvantaged populations, then asking for minimum contributions in the tens of thousands is unrealistic. But having board members buy – or buy and sell - tickets to an event, especially if they get some help and support from other board members? That is within the realm of the possible, even for people in tight financial circumstances. It could even be encouraging or motivating to the less affluent board member.

Managing "by exception" tends to mean that everything ends up as an exception, so there is no real rule or policy. Set your policy first. Then deal with the exceptions if, and only if, they arise.

## **WHY DO WE NEED SUCH A POLICY?**

One practical reason, one more philosophical one. In a practical sense, major funders such as private foundations want to see a level of commitment from the governing board of agencies that they (the foundations) support. An effective way to demonstrate such commitment is to establish a board-member donation policy, and show a high level of compliance with the policy. Foundations, major donors and professional philanthropists take a serious look board service seriously when they say that the board is expected to give equally of their time, talent and treasure.

From the philosophical point of view, this raises the question of why you, the board member, should be serving on the board in the first place. If you don't care enough about the organization and its mission to put in the time, and do the work of governing, leadership and maintaining accountability – and it is work – then you probably shouldn't be on the board in the first place. If you do care enough to serve, then the board on which you serve should be one of your top priorities (for your time and for your money). I feel uncomfortable with board members who claim to be involved but don't always attend meetings, rarely come to events, and give their month to other nonprofit causes.

## **I GET THE “GIVE OR GET” PART. WHAT ABOUT THE “GET OFF” STUFF?**

Some boards – but by no means all – become so committed to the idea of giving that they just won't tolerate board members who fail to donate. Those who don't, won't or can't donate at the anticipated level just don't have much of a future at such board, and may be asked to step down. Or just slink away on their own.

But – and this is a *very* big but – it's dangerous to use the give/get policy as a way to punish or get rid of board members who don't seem to be able to comply. Well-run governing boards need to do quite a bit of soul-searching to choose the expectations, standards and policies by which they will hold themselves accountable. Doing so wisely will provide a variety of avenues to test the mettle and commitment of those board members who have lost their passion for the organization or for other reasons cannot live up to expectations. Be thoughtful about this. Find out, discreetly and compassionately, if the board member in question has lost interest, or wants to continue in the role but has special circumstances.

This is one of the great values of having board term limits.

## **GIVE ME A SAMPLE BOARD “GIVE OR GET” POLICY**

I'll give you two instead. One is in the form of a statement that could (should?) be part of the contract every board member signs upon recruitment. The other is in the form of a policy statement loosely based on the Carver model of Policy Governance®.

### **The Contract Model**

Create a contract that is to be signed by every member of the board. (I think this contract should be reviewed at least annually with every board member, but that's just me.) If you want to establish your board give-or-get policy in the contract, then a paragraph of your contract should have language like this:

I will give a minimum of \$XXX annually, an amount which I may give from my own resources, or will raise from others. I may give this as a one-time donation, or I may pledge to give a certain amount several times during the year. If this amount is deemed too substantial for me at this time, I will give whatever financial donation I can, as approved by the Board Chair.

The other paragraphs in this contract will spell out most other expectations, such as showing up at board meetings, handling assignments or responsibilities in a timely manner, attending or participating at the organization's special events, and so on.

Board contracts are marvelous creatures, because they reduce the risk that the board member "didn't know" what was expected. We think that all board members should sign a new contract every year, whether the conditions of the contract have changed or not. We also think that the board members themselves are the ones who should craft the terms of the contract; this reinforces the notion that board members are in a position of authority.

This approach keeps everybody on their toes.

### **The Formal Policy Model**

If you and your board prefer the more formal and lengthier model of a policy statement, you might craft something that looks like this. Feel free to copy it. The format is based loosely on that utilized in the model called Policy Governance®. You will find many other great examples of board policies in John Carver and Miriam Mayhew Carver's excellent book *Reinventing Your Board*.

POLICY TYPE: GOVERNANCE PROCESS

POLICY TITLE: BOARD MEMBER CONTRIBUTIONS

*Because board service implies a commitment of the board member's skills, time, talent and treasure, it is accepted that all board members will make financial contributions to [this institution]. Accordingly,*

1. All board members will make every effort to meet the minimum amount of financial contribution, currently \$\_\_\_\_\_, every year.
  - a. Contributions may be made from the board member's private resources, or may be raised in any manner that does not conflict with Executive Limitations or otherwise compromise the organization.
  - b. Contributions may be scheduled in a series of smaller gifts or payments.
  - c. In the case of financial hardship, a board member who is unable to meet the minimum requirement may contribute to the best of his or her ability with the approval of the Board Chair.

2. Recognizing that major funding sources take the board's financial contribution into account when assessing our organization as a potential beneficiary, the members of the board commit to achieving 100% compliance with this policy every year.

## **WHAT ELSE KEEPS THE BOARD INVOLVED IN FUNDRAISING?**

Always remember this: the board's primary job is to make sure the organization is worth raising money for in the first place. (Thanks for a second time, John Carver!) If you think of your board as a "fundraising" board, then that probably means your board willingly becomes involved in peer solicitation. It means that your board also addresses the five other key roles of involvement in the fundraising effort, for which you should read my article [The Board's Role in Fundraising](#). We hope it also means that your board provides excellent governance, represents the community you serve appropriately, and challenges you and your staff to ever higher levels of results and accountability.

The board has several obligations that revolve around establishing fundraising goals and objectives – high enough to meet the strategic objectives of the organization and facilitate advancement of the mission, low enough to be achievable, prioritized appropriately to reduce risk and enable success.

Badgering your board to give money, attempting to punish board members for their failure to give money, and some other equally distasteful things may happen from time to time. I've certainly heard my share of war stories. But staff and board must come to understand that board service is both a privilege and an honor. If you all talk about the big questions enough, you'll end up with a better board, a better staff, happier clients and better results all around.

## ELLEN BRISTOL

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Ellen Bristol, president of Bristol Strategy Group, works with nonprofit organizations to improve the effectiveness of their fundraising efforts, improve total income and fund diversification, involve board and staff members more effectively, reduce turnover in the development office and maintain desired levels of quality and services.

Ellen and her team redefine the ways that fundraising teams and initiatives are designed, deployed and managed. They ensure that fundraising is tightly aligned with the mission and values, ensuring that marketing, outreach, programs and operations will produce the best possible outcomes while managing costs and shrinking cycle times. In addition to their work in strategic fund development planning and processes, the team also provides consulting services for strategic planning, board development, and leadership training.

Some typical results include:

- Moved a major player in community development from financial struggles to a healthy surplus, by making changes in governance policy
- Launched a fund diversification program for a housing agency for the first time in its history
- Built a process for defining the agency's performance goals that produced measurable gains in overall performance over a five-year period, for an economic development agency focusing on at-risk youth

"After many years in the sales business, I realized that the lessons I had learned are just as important to nonprofit development professionals. It's my mission to help you and your agency improve your funding through strategic means that will help you to work *less* - and raise *more!*"

Ellen is the developer of [Fundraising the SMART Way™](#), her firm's flagship methodology for effective fundraising based on the continuous improvement model; designer of the software toolkit Scorecard 2.0, author of the on-line assessment tool [The Leaky Bucket Assessment for Effective Fundraising](#), and an author, co-author and contributing author of several books from CharityChannel Press.

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**About the Author:** Ellen Bristol, president of Bristol Strategy Group, has been working with nonprofit agencies to improve their fund development results for the past sixteen years. When asked to describe her company's philosophy, Ellen likes to say "We bring in the science that makes the art of fundraising possible." She is the developer of the firm's flagship methodology Fundraising the SMART Way®, an evidence-based model for managing the fundraising effort on the basis of continuous improvement, and author of the e-book De-Mystifying Fundraising: Seven Steps to Fundraising Success. Ellen is a thought leader in this area, having published many articles for regional, national and global publications.

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