

The Importance of Board Members' Giving

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Chris McLeod is Executive Director of The Greater Charlotte Cultural Trust, a supporting foundation of Foundation For The Carolinas and ASC. An attorney with fifteen years of fundraising experience, Chris works with the ASC and its 24 cultural partners and their donors to build endowments through planned giving. Chris also serves as Chair for Leave A Legacy-Charlotte Region, a public awareness campaign dedicated to promoting the idea that everyone is capable of leaving a charitable bequest.

A few months ago, I received an annual appeal letter from a local nonprofit along with a quarterly newsletter that touted its accomplishments, including a significant expansion of services. Like many nonprofit newsletters, it included a special society of donors – a list of donors who contributed \$1,000 or more. This donor list was not very long, maybe 12 to 14 names, which was surprising given the organization's overall budget is more than \$5 million and number of board members. A closer review revealed that almost half of the board members did not belong to this special giving society. The executive director was on the list; the board chair was not. For me, this fact alone undermined the nonprofit's otherwise powerful and compelling case for support. I was immediately struck by the audacity of a nonprofit to ask others to make an annual contribution when its leadership had so little skin in the game.

Many nonprofits have written responsibilities and guidelines about board giving. While there may be differing opinions on what should constitute minimum giving levels, few would disagree that a board chair should contribute \$1,000 or more annually, particularly to those organizations with a budget in the millions. Many of Charlotte's cultural organizations have published guidelines that require board members to contribute anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000 annually, in addition to the expectation that they will help raise additional financial support.

Since board members are responsible for approving an annual budget, often including the allocation of millions of dollars of state and federal funds (read: tax dollars), it is not unreasonable to expect them to personally support the nonprofit at a generous level. I can say with confidence that there are many board members in Charlotte who contribute little or nothing financially to the nonprofit on whose board they serve.

In her book *The Truth About What Nonprofit Board Members Want* (2010), June Bradham observed that an organization's fundraising success is directly proportionate to board members' giving – and she has the research to prove it. The following are a few principles that board chairs should keep in mind:

- Nonprofits should have a written summary of board members' responsibilities and expectations, including expectations for giving. This document should be shared with prospective board members in advance of joining the board. Such a document is meaningless unless reviewed, approved, and embraced by the board chair and board of directors. Nonprofit staff members often complain about tepid board giving, but few fail to appreciate that these expectations need to be reviewed annually by the board. North Carolina Dance Theatre's executive director Doug

Singleton makes it a practice to meet with each board member on an annual basis and discuss the ways that they want to contribute to the organization in the coming year.

- The board should be provided with an aggregate list of board members' gifts (without names) so that it can be familiar with the range of gifts and the impression that this record of giving provides its most generous funders. Many board members fail to understand the impact that lukewarm board giving on the organization's overall fundraising success.
- Consider the implications if your most generous funders (United Way, ASC, The Duke Endowment or The Leon Levine Foundation) were to request information about board giving. Few grant makers are willing to invest in organizations where the board limits its role to mere oversight or program administration and budget allocation.
- A nonprofit board should be familiar with the organization's "top 20" donors and each board member should share responsibility for expressing appreciation for a specific donor's support and communicating its impact on the organization with the coordination of the nonprofit staff. The identity of donors who request anonymity should be known only to the executive director and the board chair.
- Nonprofit boards are made up of individuals, and board members should be cultivated as individual donors rather than solicited as a group.

Board giving is the cornerstone of a nonprofit's fundraising success to the extent it demonstrates commitment to the nonprofit's success. The extent to which your board members are not engaged, invested, and giving generously may be a sign of larger issues. Your nonprofit's future – and its fundraising success – depends on the philanthropic commitment of your board members.

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