Board Fundraising in Real Time

Money for our Movements

8.10.12

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Objectives

- Discover how to create a sense of urgency and agency among Board members so that they feel they need to fundraise now and that they can do so effectively.
- Find new ways to move Board members to be effective ambassadors and askers.
- Build Board member-to-board member peer “voice” and leadership in fundraising.
- Develop a variety of strategies to support and supplement your Board member fundraising team, including engaging the “busy” Board member.
- Leave with at least five ideas on how to incorporate these new strategies into your daily work.
In your small groups, make a list of five things that your Board members can do for fundraising—OTHER than ask for money!

1. ________________________________________________________________
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   ________________________________________________________________

2. ________________________________________________________________
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3. ________________________________________________________________
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4. ________________________________________________________________
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5. ________________________________________________________________
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Fundraising Role of Individual Board Members

- Make a personally significant donation
- Contribute to the mailing list
- Identify and evaluate prospects
- Friend-raise
- Write letters
- Personalize letters and invitations
- Write thank you notes
- Be part of an asking team
- Mentor other board members to fundraise

- **ASK**

- ____________________________________________________________________________

- ____________________________________________________________________________

- ____________________________________________________________________________
## The Development Cycle

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**100%**
Fundraising Rules

- Fundraising is Friendraising
- People give to People
- Peers give to Peers
- Fundraising is an Exchange
- Successful fundraising is the **right person** asking the **right person** for the **right amount** of the **right thing** at the **right time** at the **right place** and in the **right way**.
Donor Development Worksheet

**Identification** – who, if they knew enough about the agency and were approached in the right way, might be interested in helping to support this work

*Question: Who can I identify who might be interested in supporting our group’s work?*

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

**Cultivation** – build their knowledge, interest, understanding of what we do, how special we are at what we do, and how it’s a community of people that supports it

*Question: What needs to happen so that the people I have identified in item #1 know enough about the organization (and are positively impressed) so that they are ready to be asked to join its pantheon of supporters?*

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

**Solicitation** – ask for the gift (the right amount for the right project in the right way/timing)

*Question: How does this person (these people) need to be asked? For how much? For what reason? By whom?*

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

**Recognition** – appreciation and understanding of how important and meaningful their gift has been to the organization, what it has made possible

*Question: How can I recognize this person (these people) in a way that is meaningful to him/her? What is my role in that process?*

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Broaden Your Base of Askers

Managing and Supporting Board Fundraising Efforts

- Set a concrete (achievable goal)
- Create a working steering group
- Be clear what people are expected to do
- Train people to be effective askers
- Develop appropriate materials, such as a script or talking points
- Update participants about their progress
- Give them recognition for their success (use carrots, not sticks)
Between now and January 30, 2013, I, ________________, commit to the following fundraising activities:

______ Inviting ____ (#) people I think could help the organization (money, things, access) to “cultivation/visibility” events.

______ Targeting ____ (#) personal friends/colleagues who might be interested in the our organization if they knew more about it.

______ Hosting/Co-hosting (circle one) ____ (#) of house parties at my home/at someone else’s home (circle one). I will invite ____ (#) of people to this house party with the intent of getting ____ (#) people to actually attend.

______ Sending out ____ (#) newsletters with a personal note ____ times a year.

______ Helping to write and produce the newsletter, press releases, and other publicity materials.

______ Sponsoring a major event and recruiting ____ (#) of colleagues in the field to do the same.

______ Directly (1-1) asking ____ (#) individuals for significant contributions in the range of $____ to $____.

I will ask ____ (#) of these prospects from my own circle of acquaintances.
I will ask ____ (#) of these prospects from a list supplied to me.

______ Sending out ____ (#) solicitation letters to my personal contacts during the organization’s annual mailing, including writing personal notes on all, and following up by phone with ____ (#) letters per mailing.

______ Soliciting ____ (#) Journal Greetings once a year.

______ Spearheading the Corporate Support Council, including recruiting ____ (#) new members and developing and implementing strategies to stay in touch with existing members and get the most out of them.

______ Serving on the Board committee that liaisons with the Corporate Support Council. This could involve attending Corporate Support Council luncheons or other meetings, speaking with colleagues about the organization, attending meetings to talk up the organization, etc.
Sample Board Member Fundraising Commitment
(PAGE 2 OF 2)

_____ Developing a Friends of NHSNYC Council to solicit others.

_____ Providing administrative support to the organization’s fundraising efforts such as envelope-stuffing, event-planning, etc.

_____ Making contributions to the organization in memory of/in honor of a friend and encouraging ____ (#) friends to do the same.

_____ Remembering the organization in my will and suggesting that ____ (#) friends do the same.

_____ Serving on the Board Fundraising Committee.

_____ Finding ____ (#) new members for the fundraising committee.

Other fundraising commitments I would like to make are:

I am comfortable setting the following dollar goal for myself to raise: _______________.

I UNDERSTAND THAT I AM ALSO EXPECTED TO GIVE AN ANNUAL PERSONAL FINANCIAL DONATION OF AN AMOUNT THAT IS, FOR ME, A SUBSTANTIAL AND MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION.

I need the following types of staff support:

Activity/Staff Support Needed

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Committee Goal:
To develop and implement a strategic fundraising plan that will help broaden our reach to new potential donors and raise more unrestricted funds for our organization.

Committee Members will:

- Commit to serve for a minimum of one year
- Attend committee meetings, every other month once the plan is in place
- Help develop and implement a fundraising plan which includes a variety of fundraising activities.
- Help produce an annual fundraiser
- Garner financial support for the Organization by committing to a variety of activities such as personalizing and sending appeal letters, inviting contacts to luncheons, and holding a meeting to introduce your contacts to the organization. These activities will be determined by the fundraising plan
- Reach out to colleagues and personal contacts on behalf of the Organization
- Be a spokesperson for the Organization in professional and personal settings
- Help identify and contact at least one additional person for the Committee before stepping down
- Make a personally significant donation
- Provide fundraising and friendraising leadership to the entire board
Board Action Plan

Areas for Action

- Must be realistic
- Board must commit to it and “own” it
- Help the board articulate its direction and set goals
- Restore the mission as central to board deliberations.
- Identify your allies on the Board who will help convince their peers fundraising is for them.
- Apply the lens of the Development Cycle to your group’s every activity, especially program events, to generate new opportunities for board-related involvement.
- Speak about fundraising through peer voices – stay behind the curtain.
- Strengthen and support Board fundraising structures, particularly your Fundraising Committee.
- Bend time – create shorter term assignments, meet and work virtually more and face-to-face less.

Make an action plan with three steps based on the most critical issues for your Board, based on today’s session.

1.

________________________________________________________________________
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________________________________________________________________________

2.

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3.

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________________________________________________________________________
Board Member Fundraising Activation:
Where are your board members along this continuum?

- Recruiting resource-getters from the outside world
- Organizing board efforts
- Spurring other board members to action
- Thinking of ideas on their own
- Following through (without a second request) on what they agree to do
- Needing a couple of nudges but then following through
- Looking to be told what to do, task by task
- Agreeing and then not coming through
- Ignoring your emails / won’t answer phone calls
FOR THREE DECADES, CAUSE EFFECTIVE has been helping nonprofits transform their fundraising, governance, and special events. As we look back over this time, we are struck by the changing nature of leisure time and the profound impact of this change on the nonprofit sector.

From furtive smartphone checking under the table to the impossibility of finding a meeting time for a committee whose members’ work and family commitments have them doing double and triple shifts, the changing nexus between leisure time and work time is affecting volunteer-based fundraising and governance in multiple ways.

What are the impacts of these changes on nonprofits—and how can we adapt what we ask of people volunteering for social change, particularly around fundraising?

Sociologists have charted the squeeze on discretionary time over the past couple of decades. In the 1990s, Arlie Russell Hochschild wrote in *The Time Bind* about the blurring home-work distinction; and in *The Overworked American*, Juliet Schor noted the historic shrinkage of leisure time that came from both additional work commitments and a higher standard of care for children and the household. In the wake of the current economic upheaval, a Harris Poll found that Americans lost an average of 20 percent of their available leisure time from 2007 to 2008 alone.

But lately, and for nonprofit volunteerism especially, the situation seems to be getting worse. Board members are even more distracted: those who still have jobs have often taken on additional assignments at work, and those who’ve lost their jobs are expending all their energy looking for new work; when they find it, they’re absorbed in learning and succeeding in a new professional culture.

The result? Committees without leaders (“I could do a task, but not take on the whole responsibility”), opportunities left on the table (“It’s great that Ms. Connections agreed to be the honoree but we don’t have anyone to chair the event”), and the continuance of the political status quo (“We just couldn’t get enough people out to the community meeting to make a difference”).

We recently assisted a nonprofit in an excruciating three-month search for a new board chair. A number of people were willing to accept a limited assignment (“Sure, I’ll write 20 thank-you letters”) but not to take on a position they would need to take home and “own.” With another nonprofit, we went through two months of failed attempts to nail down a meeting date—with the four committee members so overbooked that two meetings that were calendared fell through at the last moment (the group finally met by phone).

The ultimate symptom of these competing claims on board members’ time is boards that pay attention on an episodic rather than a sustained basis—a board pattern that, at best, consists of putting out fires…then not responding…then springing back into action when more fires arise…then more unresponsiveness. Board members coming together to solve
THE ULTIMATE SYMPTOM OF THESE COMPETING CLAIMS ON BOARD MEMBERS’ TIME IS BOARDS THAT PAY ATTENTION ON AN EPISODIC RATHER THAN A SUSTAINED BASIS.

a crisis, then reverting to ignoring emails once the emergency is over. Boards ending up reactive instead of generative, with fundraising committees that come together for specific events rather than looking after the organization’s overall relationship-building ladder. Boards that are complacent rather than driving nonprofit fundraising and outreach.

You may have read about what’s called the Second Shift—that stretch of housework and family responsibilities that await parents as they head home from work—and about the juggling that the electronic tether both enables and demands (come home from work, eat and put the kids to bed, back on the computer for a couple more hours of work). Not to mention the Third Shift—the time that women, in particular, spend as caregivers for family members outside the home.

But what about the Voluntary Shift—the time spent caregiving to heal the larger community, indeed the world?

In thirty years of energizing volunteers to participate in fundraising, we’ve been through lots of periods of economic ups and downs. During that time, government funding has increased, decreased, and even disappeared, pulling the rug out from nonprofit programming. Causes that were “hot” among foundations have lost their luster, with other theories of change taking their place. Corporations have swung from funding out of a sense of community responsibility to using corporate funds for flashier visibility purposes, and back again. But throughout the past three decades, we’ve always seen a steady increase in individual donations raised through the perseverance of dedicated volunteers.

Adapting to the New Reality

How can we reconcile the time-pressed nature of America in the second decade of the twenty-first century with our continued need for volunteer-based fundraising?

Our first piece of advice is to adapt—not to fight. In uncertain economic times like the present, it is helpful to return to Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs (see Cause Effective’s 5/3/10 blog post for a fuller exploration of this pyramid’s relevance to fundraising).

What the pyramid tells us, in essence, is that people can’t pay attention to the Voluntary Shift (which is part of self-actualization) until they’re satisfied they’ve met their needs that fall lower on the pyramid. In other words, if someone is hungry (physiological needs), or doesn’t know where their kids are going to sleep (safety needs), they can’t concentrate on pursuing friendship (social needs), gaining social status (esteem needs), or striving for justice (self-actualization). No matter how much they might like to, they can’t focus on volunteering if they’re at a lower point on the pyramid at this moment in their life. The answer in that case is to keep the door open while letting them off the hook—for now.

For others who are stressed but somewhere in the middle of this framework, here are some tips from 30 years in the trenches that we’ve found particularly useful in supporting volunteer fundraisers now.

Make it easy. In a practical sense, this means not insisting on an in-person meeting if you can’t get it—or at the least, offering childcare that seems like a plus, not simply low-quality daycare.
This holds true for fundraising activities as well—one Cause Effective client just sold out a previously languishing wine-tasting series to parents because they offered a pizza party and creative arts workshop to the kids at the same time.

Consider making the most of new technology for video chats, document sharing, and the like, so that people can work for you in their own time and space.

**Chunk it up.** We’ve found that assignments we used to be able to give out whole (“Thanks for taking on this year’s annual appeal, here’s the timeline and a template from last year”) need to be “chunked” into smaller pieces and divided up. While this strategy can be successful at spreading the tasks across several people who may each be able to do a part, it requires much clearer instructions and more work up front—if something’s not in the timeline and someone only has part of the job, they’re less likely to notice and the forgotten piece is less likely to get done (“Whoops! Getting stamps wasn’t in anyone’s job”). It means rethinking the order and even the shape of a voluntary assignment.

**Ask for something specific and small.** We’ve seen that asking for a bounded amount of time—say, an evening—is likely to be more successful than giving a take-home assignment with an open-ended time frame. For example, an assignment of 10 follow-up calls is much likelier to get accomplished if the request is for “Next Wednesday evening from 7-9 and then you can go home and leave it behind” than if it’s an ask to “Take this list of 10 donors and call them to remind them about this year’s annual appeal.”

**Give end times.** One reason special events are so successful at rallying boards to fundraising (even though they take an incredible amount of time) is that volunteers can see the light at the end of the tunnel. “Once it’s over I can clean the house”—or take the kids to the zoo, or even spend a day at the beach—goes the volunteer’s thinking. The chunk-it-up theory works here too—even if a project is long, lasting a year or more, divide it into smaller pieces so there’s always a goal-line in view. Volunteers can sprint, but not forever.

**Offer flexibility.** In the same way that performing arts organizations now offer subscriptions with maximum options and minimal commitment, we need to ask for voluntary time in ways that volunteers can fit into their lives and their priorities. Also, try a little psychology borrowed from child-rearing—if you offer people a choice they are more likely to choose one of the options and feel in control of the one they choose (and empowered volunteers ultimately feel more obligated to see the task through).

**Respect people’s time.** Run meetings well so people feel their time is used well for deliberation—that it was important that they showed up. And start on time, no matter how many people aren’t there—they’ll get the message after one or two sessions.

**Build the team.** Don’t expect a small board to manage all the responsibilities of governing and fundraising if you don’t have enough people to form viable committees. With clearly stated expectations in hand, continually be on the lookout to recruit more folks who care about your mission and can also find the time to help. Assign partners when parsing out volunteer responsibilities—it’s harder to let a person down than an organization, and it’s more fun to work with others.

You can also entice non-board members into serving on board committees—that’s one way to enlist someone with a special skill or a focused amount of time without their having to sign on to the full package of board service. To that end, recruit volunteers with clear expectations so that people excited about the mission don’t commit beyond their time or capacity.

**Diversify the pool.** Think about recruiting younger people who don’t yet have families, or young “professional-board” folks. Like attracts like, so you may want to create a “Young Supporters” group to throw bar parties and the like for your organization.

**Create a learning culture.** Don’t assume that because someone agreed to be on your board ten years ago or even two years ago, they’re still filled with the excitement of the mission. Re-cultivate your board members to keep them motivated. For example, ask board members to give out certificates of completion at the youth advocates training—then hold a board meeting right after.
In addition, consider providing some form of professional development or training to board members so they feel they are learning for their own futures. Give your board frequent opportunities to learn about the issues that surround your mission and work. Involve them in thinking together with you about what’s best for the organization.

Make activities do double duty. Organize volunteering to serve social as well as social justice aims. It’s well known that volunteering is a great way to meet people with similar interests. Highlight that advantage by building in collegiality (sharing food at meetings is a quick way to do so). Make sure board members party/eat/socialize together at least once a year, even at the cost of time on organizational business—that bonding is priceless. Add going out to dinner together to one board meeting a year.

Involve kids. Don’t assume people can turn off (or hand over) the rest of their lives (see “Make it easy” above). There are so few occasions for family togetherness—make volunteering a win-win by offering this opportunity!

The common denominator to all these tips is that when volunteers can see how to fit the work within their time constraints, they’re happy to help.

Here are two more important strategies that make volunteering rewarding enough to raise it above the fray of competing priorities.

Say thank you. Make sure people feel good about their volunteer service with you and that they see the gains their dedication has engendered. Let them know you value their efforts—and make a special attempt to praise them in front of their peers. Create a climate of appreciation.

Recognize small victories. People gravitate toward success. Just as in organizing, we need to call out the incremental wins—and every effort counts. “You made two phone calls—terrific!” It’s more important that people are successful at fundraising—and start to view themselves as successful at fundraising—than that they attempt a giant effort and fail. In the midst of the stresses of daily life, voluntary fundraising for our causes needs to be made deeply satisfying for those who engage in it.

Don’t Forget Yourself

Finally, the shrinking nature of leisure time has an impact on those of us who work in nonprofits as well.

“If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution” is a quote commonly attributed to Emma Goldman. Whether or not she actually said it, the attitude remains valid. Those of us working for social change need to recognize the toll that the relentless pace of today’s plugged-in environment takes on all of us (Cause Effective’s 6/7/11 blog post addresses this), and work to keep it at bay.

Turn it off—at least one day a week. Renew and refresh. Read a novel, go swimming, get on a bike—whatever your passion. Do something with your leisure time that allows you to come back to work reinvigorated and ready to change the world again, one action at a time.

Judy Levine is executive director of Cause Effective (causeeffective.org), a nonprofit that for three decades has been helping people transform their passion for mission into an enduring ability to raise funds. She writes a blog on fundraising at CauseEffectivePerspective.net.
Strengthening Nonprofits

Board Fundraising:
Setting the Stage for Success

Give, get or get off! Those famous five words...
But while we’ve all heard them, how exactly, do we get our boards to live them?
Last month’s New York Nonprofit Press talked about the relationship between oversight and management. This month we’re going to talk about the one area in which you absolutely want board members providing active and hands-on implementation support – fundraising.

“There is no area in which you absolutely want board members providing active and hands-on implementation support,” fundraising.”

Therein lies the rub.
How can we hold board members at arms-length when it comes to program development, financial management and human resources – areas where boards are supposed to set policy but let staff manage implementation – and yet ask them to step up and actually do the work of fundraising?

The answer is: thoughtfully, with plenty of encouragement, in partnership with staff, and only once the board is convinced of the absolute necessity of shouldering that responsibility.

Often, our agencies have lumbered along for years with minimal board fundraising. Then, all of a sudden (or so it seems to board members), they’re being asked to do more – and in an activity (asking for money) that’s not for the faint of heart. You can’t blame board members in this situation for secretly feeling that this is all some “best practices” plot and that if they just keep doing what they’ve always done, the agency will keep performing as well as it always has – without their fundraising effort.

So, the first job in building board fundraising engagement is to make the case for change. Not the case for why the agency is deserving of support, but why a board change. Not the case for why the agency raising effort.

Well as it always has – without their fundraising, the agency will keep performing as it has. The very idea of donor cultivation is foreign: “Donald Trump has lots of money, let’s ask him for a $1 million grant”. The relationship of fundraising costs to net proceeds is oblique: “Let’s rent the Rockefeller Center Ice Skating Rink and have a $10 per-person, skating party”. The rationale for sponsor motivation is vague: “Let’s get Bruce Springsteen to give a concert. He sings about working people and we do workforce development.”

Yet you don’t want to squash board members’ newfound enthusiasm.

The answer is a board fundraising plan – a coordinated sequence of activities that board members engage in over time (preferably coinciding with your fiscal year) which encompasses donor identification, cultivation, multiple solicitation methods matched to varied gift sizes, and donor recognition. You may need to include some board training as part of this plan. That saves you, the chief executive, from serving in the position of chief staff naysayer.

A good consultant will be able to harness your board’s energy to practical activities while also addressing their unstat- ted fears (we all have them). If you have professional development staff, they may be able to support board members in this role. But, as we all know, “a prophet is without honor in his own country.” Board members, who don’t really want to do what you are asking, will be less likely to discount the advice of an “outside expert.” At Cause Effective, we’ve had decades of experience cajoling reluctant board members into fundraising readiness, and we’ve got a few tricks up our sleeves. So will any other reputable consultant dealing with board fundraising engagement.

The key to this process is your board’s fundraising committee: This is the inner circle of board fundraising – the group of folks who are responsible for steering your board along this path. They won’t be the only ones doing fundraising, but they are the ones responsible for monitoring and inspiring the rest of the board to pitch in. The chair of this committee is the most important person in getting your board to actively fundraise. So, choose someone with energy to spare, who’s well-respected by other board members – and fearless.

Board members can clue in to the fundraising process at many levels. Involving board members in donor cultivation can be a great way to refresh their own knowledge of your agency. For example, ask board members to host a dinner for friends after attending a workforce training graduation? They can combine social and organization- al purposes, bringing in donor prospects (i.e. friends) to experience your program at first hand. For example, ask board members to help a dinner for friends after attending a workforce training graduation? They can combine social and organization- al purposes, bringing in donor prospects (i.e. friends) to experience your program at first hand. They can combine social and organization- al purposes, bringing in donor prospects (i.e. friends) to experience your program at first hand. They can combine social and organization- al purposes, bringing in donor prospects (i.e. friends) to experience your program at first hand.

Yet the very premise of board service is that board members have access far beyond the staff. We need that access, so how do we help them to help us? By partnering with them.

To get consistent fundraising action from board members, try managing up. Master the skill of nudging, not nagging. Weigh what you ask of them so they’re not treated as just another pair of hands. Provide them with the materials (printed matter, talking points, pre-meeting briefings) they need to do the job successfully. And don’t forget the best management tool of all – praise for a job well-done (or wholeheart- edly attempted).

Fundraising is a tough job, with plenty of opportunity for rejection. The more you can set your board members up for success, the more they’ll actually achieve.

Judy Levine is Executive Director of Cause Effective (www.causeeffective.org), which provides management consulting services to nonprofits.

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United Way
of New York City

not just at one big shindig per year), and offer lots of group support (how about scheduling a repeating board meeting agenda item recognizing board member fundraising efforts?), you should find some – probably not all, but over time, a majority – of your board members will start to find their fundraising home ground.

That doesn’t mean that everyone will be capable of making $10,000 asks: but it does mean that everyone should find a level appropriate to their connections and personal disposition. Sure, every group has some long-time fundraising gourmets – board members who’ve served for years without being expected to raise money, and who aren’t going to start now. But, over time the bulk of your board will move into compliance and start to self-monitor its performance in this area.

A word about staff support: Many chief executives have the unrealistic fantasy that once their boards start to fundraise, they’ll do it on their own and just report back their “winnings”. Sorry, it doesn’t happen like that. No matter their good intentions, board members have lives that interfere with their board service. They promise to make a few calls, then get home and find that their kid’s failing Spanish class or the dog’s arthritis is acting up. They’re on loan to your organization, and once they leave your premises, life happens to them.

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“the one area in which you absolutely want board members providing active and hands-on implementation support is fundraising.”

“The answer is a board fundraising plan – a coordinated sequence of activities that board members engage in over time.”

Judy Levine
Diversity has long been a holy grail for nonprofits, particularly in funding.

And never more so than now.

For many nonprofits, the times feel desperate: stories abound of 20%, even 40% cuts, because long-time funders can no longer be counted upon. More is still to come, as New York and other states prepare to hack away at budget gaps and the flow of Federal stimulus money dries up.

In all the years that Cause Effective has been training nonprofits in fundraising, never has the warning “Don’t keep all your eggs in the same basket” been truer.

But for organizations without a history of diverse support…for those whose constituents, staff and boards are rooted in low-income communities…or whose work is focused on pushing social change…can you get there? How do you get there? And, is it even worthwhile starting on that path in these difficult times?

The answer is, unequivocally, yes. What follows are some of the principles and practices that Cause Effective has found most successful over three decades of helping community-based nonprofits to diversify their funding, and in particular, to draw individual donors to their causes. Woven in are the stories of how two organizations have managed this change with Cause Effective’s support in the past couple of years – St. Nicks Alliance, a 35-year-old community development organization serving Williamsburg and Greenpoint; and the Center for Family Representation (CFR), an 8-year-old law and policy organization that works to strengthen families in crisis.

**Where There’s A Will**

The first step in broadening your donor base is creating a collective sense of urgency about changing the way you do business – and it starts with the board. No matter what your board composition, you’ve got to bust through board members’ belief that at the end of the day, if they don’t step up to fundraise, someone (namely the executive director) will pick up the slack.

Why insist on this change from the board first? Because fundraising is all about people reaching out to people, and even if your board hasn’t been a “fundraising board,” board members need to be at the heart of creating the new relationships you need. The good news is that board members of all incomes and dispositions can be excellent relationship-builders. Indeed, once the process of fundraising is demystified, many of your heretofore fundraising-averse, shy board members will discover their talent at being compelling advocates. (And as part of this process, you’ll probably also meet some folks whom you can add to the board to enhance its ability to open new doors.)

But none of this takes place in defiance of the laws of physics. How are you going to overcome inertia, or, for board members, the familiar Path of Least Resistance? To wit: There are many things we ought to do in our busy daily lives, but we pick the things we actually do by weighing factors such as: “What will the consequences be if I don’t do the task at hand?” If the consequences are you’ll be fired from your job, or your 4-year-old kid will be left alone on a NYC street corner – then those tasks vault to the head of the list. But where does that leave fundraising?

If the consequences of doing nothing are that your organization’s executive director or another board member will take up more of the slack – well, it’s clear that item is going to slide lower on the list. Combine that with many board members’ natural inhibitions against “begging for money,” and you can see the challenge of activating board members if fundraising hasn’t historically been part of the board’s expected behavior.

And inertia isn’t limited to the board. Many staff members, understandably, also have an attachment to the status quo – to raising funds from a few comfortable sources that have historically been an easy lift.

If these symptoms sound all too familiar, however, don’t lose hope – because out of desperation comes opportunity.

I don’t need to go into all the reasons why organizations that have relied on single or dual-sector support need to branch out. But a few stand out: meeting general operating needs left short by cuts in government support…the chance to invest in mission-driven opportunities when they arise as opposed to only reacting to government or foundation priorities…creating a new pool of supporters who can be called upon in a pinch to help you meet a newly-emerging need…and, not least of all, the ability to gain access to funders you have yet to meet through connections initiated by a friend-of-a-friend.

So a prerequisite to building a diverse donor base in these times is harnessing that sense of desperation to create a willingness to change. The more specific you can be with your board about what’s at stake – the impact on your mission – the more likely it is they will undertake this transformation.

For the Center for Family Representation, the final push was the fact that their government funding base was shifting and would no longer cover the full costs of their program. Combined with indications that recession-weary foundations were more risk-averse, they decided to take the plunge. “The recession was like
a gun to our heads – it kept us focused on the need to do this,” explained CFR’s Executive Director Sue Jacobs. “It was clear we had to have a deeper funding bench to ride it out.”

Willingness comes before faith. If you can create an opening, a sense of “Let’s give it a try…what do we have to lose?” – then you’re ready to get started.

Gather Your Team
The first step is to pull together a diverse group of folks to brainstorm where you might best find new supporters. Sometimes that’s your board fundraising committee with the addition of a few key staff. But if that committee is moribund, or gathers simply to plan events and doesn’t have your organization’s most strategic thinkers on it, you’ll need some new blood.

If your fundraising committee is composed of people who are primarily focused on selling tables and choosing menus, invite the most savvy of them along with some of your smartest board and senior staff members to form the nucleus of an ad hoc, short-term task force. That’s just the start to this group’s make-up, though. The next step is to brainstorm a list of people outside the inner circle.

Why invite outsiders? This process requires a thoughtful assessment of your agency’s place in the world; a nuanced analysis of who might care about you and why; and an out-of-the-box understanding of how you can use the web of connections you’ve established over the years to build new contacts who will eventually lead you to new resources and to a wider circle of “askers.”

You want to capture the rolodexes – and thinking caps – of folks who care about your agency, but whom you’ve never put to work helping you reach out. People like donors, volunteers, well-networked community members, even institutional funders who’ve been personal fans – this is a chance for them to help you with advice, without asking them for more money.

St. Nicks Alliance’s 12-member fundraising task force was made up of several long-time board members together with a few new board recruits, some senior staff, a few local business people, and a donor who’d made contributions out of the blue although he was not known to the group. When Michael Rochford, St. Nicks Alliance’s long-time Executive Director, called this donor to thank him, Rochford asked if he’d be interested in joining this committee – and the donor agreed. “You have to have faith that people will be there;” reflects Rochford. “Sometimes it seems rather bleak, that you might not be able to find people who are supporters – but they are out there, and if you find the right ways to get them connected, they will support the work.”

Do people on this task force have to be donors already? Interestingly enough, no…at least not yet. They have to think you do good work, and be willing to think out loud with you about:

i) who else might be interested in your work;
ii) why your work would intrigue those people;
iii) how you’d introduce your agency to these new folks;
iv) where the relationship might get started; and
v) what benefits might ultimately result.

Often, after learning more about your agency in these task force meetings – hearing about its impact and its needs – task force members that weren’t donors step forward to provide support, and also bring in other prospects as well as pro bono resources.

There’s another reason to bring outsiders into this group; they see you through the lens of the general public. Yes, they may be fans (otherwise they wouldn’t have agreed to spend the time); but they’re not so deeply on the inside that they can’t tell it like they really see it. CFR’s group, for instance, told the staff:

“We’re the kind of people you want to reach; and finally, after two hours, we now understand what you do, but you need to deliver that message in a much more succinct way.”

That’s a perception that CFR clearly needed to hear, but wasn’t going to get by sitting around with staff and people who’d been on the board forever. “As a result of this process we got a second layer of people who wanted to help us,” reflects Jacobs, and those new voices articulated a crucial viewpoint that needed to be heard.

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**Brainstorm The Possibilities**

Ideally this brainstorming group will meet 2-3 times. But start with one meeting if that’s all you can get up front. What’s on the agenda?

The first meeting sets the groundwork – why people might support your cause (your “case”) and who might be interested in that case. Keep in mind, your attraction for supporters is not just the good stuff that you do – it’s the perception of value that others have of you. Defining what that value is for different segments of donors and understanding how to communicate it effectively can give you a rich array of pathways to pursue.

Don’t worry too much about individual names at this point – in fact, put them in a lock box for now, because it’s more important to name the types of folks (we call them “markets”) who might be receptive if approached by the right person for the right reason for the right thing. You will encourage more brainstorming by focusing on the characteristics of potential supporters (i.e. retired teachers living on the Upper West Side who have a commitment to
young children) rather than diving into specific people the group thinks of immediately – so don’t narrow down your list too soon.

In CFR’s case, the list of markets included:

- Law firm partners
- Women Associates
- Board
- Staff
- Leadership Council
- Women’s Legal Associations
- Women Corporate Lawyers
- Women in Finance
- Women in Communications
- Women in Marketing/ Publishing
- Journalists/ writers with time to tell a story
- Faith-Based Organizations and Churches
- People focused on good government
- Corporations that serve women
- Student Associations
- Politicians and Public Officials
- Women’s Donor Network
- Vendors
- Retired Judges
- Retired Professionals in the field
- Psychiatrists & Psychologists
- MDs & RNs
- OB/GYNs
- Pediatricians
- Young professionals
- Working professional moms
- Celebrities
- Teachers & Academics
- People tied to systemic justice
- Fiscal conservatives
- Grandparents
- 2nd generation parents

When the group brainstorming really gets going, this list invariably covers an entire easel pad sheet and more. The question then becomes: how do we choose the most important of all these potential donor markets since we clearly can’t follow up on them all?

To winnow the list down, remember three critical letters:

- L – for Linkage (how close they are to the organization or to someone connected to the organization)
- I – for Interest (how interested they are in issues related to your mission – they don’t have to know about your organization yet, but if they have no interest in children or legal access or social equity you might as well move on to someone who does)
- A – for Ability (if they make charitable gifts, how readily they do so, and what kind of capacity they have to give; but note, this factor alone does not make them a ready prospect to give to your organization, as opposed to the nonprofit down the block)

How likely someone is to give and the size of their gift will be in direct proportion to these three criteria.

The next step is to go through this long list of markets and use the general principles of LIA to sort out three levels of priority. Delineate each market as part of either:

The “A” List – we MUST have these folks as donors (how could we hold up our heads if they weren’t supporting us?)

The “B” List – these folks are important to our donor development effort; we’d better work toward getting them on board

The “C” List – it would be nice to reach these folks, if there were time

As you might imagine, you’ll probably never get to the C’s, and even the B’s will most likely go onto a “back burner” type of cultivation – sending them a newsletter or invitations to events but not spending a lot of energy on actively developing those connections.

That energy is devoted to securing the A’s.

This is how St. Nicks Alliance’s listing broke out:

**Primary Markets (A’s)**

- Current donors
- Board members
- Staff members and the people they can reach out to
- Business owners involved in the local BID
- Professional service providers – lawyers, architects, accountants
- Local developers
- Contractors and other vendors
- Corporations seeking goodwill in the area
- Banks
- Small business owners
- Local newspaper advertisers
- Local newspaper readers
- Residents of St. Nicks-developed housing
- St. Nicks area homeowners, including new, affluent residents
- Young professionals interested in community development issues
- Ex staff/board members
- Families of clients
- Neighborhood artists

**Secondary Markets (Other)**

- Unions
- Employers who hire trainees
- Ethnic organizations
- Local industry outside of the BID
- Local retailers, restaurants and bars
- Real estate firms
- Elected officials
- Homebuyer clients
- Coop owners
- Former clients
- Educators

You can see that there’s a wealth of prospects to be pursued, once you widen your view from just “people with money” as the primary determinant and start looking for people with connections and likely interest.

**Create a Year-Long Donor Development Plan**

Now that you know who the likely candidates are, the next step is to develop an annual plan of action that embraces each phase of the development cycle (Identification-Cultivation-Solicitation-Recognition) to build prospect interest, commitment and “readiness.”

Just like you put a toe in the water before diving in, prospects have to get introduced to your work and “fall in love” (or at least be pretty darned impressed) before they’re going to be ready to make a meaningful gift.

And while of course you’ll take a contribution of any size, your ultimate goal is a deliberate decision by a donor to invest in your impact…which you then “pay back” with acknowledgement of the effect of their donation…which leads to a second contribution…and then perhaps to a larger gift…and eventually to that person’s becoming an asker themselves.

That sequence moves you toward an ever-widening circle of askers. It also stops your board from getting stuck at the broken-record response of “We’ve already asked everyone we know.” Remember, the key question for your long-term fundraising success is not “Who can we ask for money?” but “Who can we get to ask for us?”

Your plan should include opportunities to: i) introduce your agency to prospects in your target markets; ii) solicit them in a variety of ways once they’ve “gotten” why your work matters; and iii) recognize their impact in a way that’s meaningful to them. Fundraising has to happen year-round, and your plan provides the scaffolding for your agency’s day-by-day actions. The plan can also serve to give your board members the courage to get on the bandwagon, notes St. Nicks Alliance’s Rochford:

“We’d wanted to encourage the board to be more active in fundraising for years, but had been met with blank stares. No one objected, but no one knew personally how they could go through with that. The plan got the board over that hump – now there was a clear path to doing more direct fundraising.”

At St. Nicks Alliance, a more fundraising-savvy board also resulted in board contributions themselves increasing 10-fold (from a nominal total of $1,000 to a more broad-based total of $10,000) – a side benefit of “Be the change you wish for…”
Cultivate Through Trusted Messengers

Peer-to-peer is the single most important principle in fundraising, and never more so than in introducing your agency to new donor prospects.

To catch the attention of prospects and penetrate the fog of the 3,000 promotional messages we see each day (between corporate ads and direct mail from other charities), we need trusted messengers.

When you use such a messenger, like a board member (or a benefit committee member, in the case of a special event), a contact of theirs who is a stranger to you is much more likely to pay attention to a cause they might otherwise have overlooked. This means you will need to identify key individuals in each of your core target markets to carry your message to their peers.

This could look like...a board member at a law firm hosting a breakfast for her colleagues in which you talk about the cutting-edge legal issues your organization’s work touches on.

Or asking one of your most loyal donors to invite two couples to be their guest at your annual benefit, and sitting an alumnus at their table to spark those newbies’ interest in the life-changing impact your organization has.

Or inviting a current funder to present the completion certificates at your ESL graduation (giving people a part in the proceedings is one surefire way to ensure they show up), and asking them to bring along a peer who would meet with you and them afterwards.

All of these involve using a personal connection along with a programmatic hook – in other words, capitalizing on linkage while building interest. The fact is, getting back to L-I-A, that we can’t do much about someone’s A(bility) – but we can do a lot to build someone’s l(Interest) and our L(inkage) to them, and that’s what the cultivation phase of the development cycle is all about.

For organizations that are building relationships in new markets, using the people they know in those markets to reach out to others is key.

CFR transformed its escorted tours of the NYC court system from an occasional ad hoc activity into a planned, deliberate process of donor development that board members now use to introduce their contacts to the agency’s impact: “Before, if we met somebody who seemed interested in us I’d say ‘Well maybe you’d like to come to court.’ Now, we have dates to do this quarterly and it’s much more structured – we know why we are doing these and what we want to get out of them,” explains Jacobs.

Several new board members joined after such a tour, where they witnessed firsthand the vital nature of CFR’s work.

St. Nicks Alliance’s board fundraising committee sponsored two “friend-raiser” cocktail parties and asked the staff to put together a community engagement event (the Alliance sponsored a park cleanup which got 200 community members more connected with the agency). In addition, the board took on forming an active benefit committee for the first time, recruiting 18 members who were asked to come to two meetings, purchase tickets, and bring 4 new people to the event. All of this outreach enabled the agency to exceed its benefit’s goal by almost 50%, raising $180,000 despite bleak economic conditions. “Broadening the circle of supporters was the key to changing the direction we were going in,” reflects Rochford.

Ask for the Right Thing

Sometimes you don’t ask for money right away. Consider asking for something easy to start out with (in-kind resources, advice, expertise) – something that builds a relationship and increases someone’s sense of being an investor in your organization, without pulling at their purse strings before they’re ready. “The biggest change for us,” reflects Jacobs, “was our understanding that the bulk of the work is in building the relationship, and that the smallest part of the effort is the ask, which is always the scariest part.”

And remember: ultimately, you are asking – not for a gift, which sounds optional and discretionary – but for an investment in changing lives. You’re asking on behalf of your constituents, clients, and community….which deserve the change that your organization’s work makes possible. This perspective should embolden you, your board members and other volunteer solicitors – and make broadening your donor base a moral imperative as well as a financial one.

St. Nicks Alliance’s staff became so enthused about this process they decided to ramp up the agency’s annual program-related Health Walk into a parent- and staff-driven fundraiser, raising $40,000 to send kids to summer camp. In the same way, once your group gets some early fundraising success and it is clear that these new ways actually pay off, you’ll find that a “second layer” of enthusiasts appears and even more ideas flow.

As Sue Jacobs of CFR realized, “I didn’t know the path to getting people to connect with this mission who didn’t have a natural inclination to do so, but I’ve discovered that you just have to scratch the surface and it is there. It’s completely do-able…although originally I probably thought it was as difficult as learning Chinese.”

Building a diversified funding base is obviously more complicated than the simple outline in this article, but these principles should get you started. It may be helpful to use a consultant to shepherd you through the planning stage and move your vision beyond the “usual” and habitual. Consultants can help to recognize your hidden assets as well as keep you on course, especially through your first steps in implementation. (And often board members will listen to consultants in a way that they can’t hear the same message from staff.)

But if you don’t have access to one don’t let that stop you – your mission deserves more money, from a wider range of sources. The steps summarized in this article can start taking you there.


Judy Levine is executive director of Cause Effective, a nonprofit that helps people transform their passion for mission into an enduring ability to raise funds. She writes a blog on fundraising at www.CauseEffectivePerspective.net.