

# Board Members as Cultural Ambassadors

Board members can be passionate, compelling advocates for their orchestras—especially when equipped with the right tactics and strategies for engaging everyone from prospective donors to legislators to newcomers.

Here, **Susan Howlett** provides proven practices to help board members represent their orchestras in the community, in an excerpt from the new edition of her influential book, *Boards on Fire! Inspiring Leaders to Raise Money Joyfully*.



I often hear board members say, “I’d be happy to represent the organization in the community if only I had a decent brochure to hand people.” They want a piece of paper or a fancier website to make the case for them, which diverts everyone’s attention from donor contact by focusing resources on document or website design.

If leaders *are* willing to talk with people, they’ve been encouraged to use a one-size-fits-all “elevator pitch.” There are two problems with an elevator pitch: 1) board members can’t remember it (because it’s not natural), and 2) no one wants to listen to them share it! Frankly, listeners would rather be talking themselves.

Unfortunately, some board members don’t know who to talk to or how to engage donors or prospects in conversations about the other person’s relationship to our mission. And they might not know how to tailor the conversation to a particular person, whether it’s a legislator,

a foundation officer, a corporate sponsor, or a friend from work.

What people really want is a passionate champion who can articulate a compelling case for support. We’re setting our leaders

## Are you spending your board members’ social capital optimally?

up to fail if we don’t help them prioritize whom to talk to, what to talk about, and how.

### Overcoming the Ambassador Barrier

#### Clarify Whom to Talk To

We tend to send board members off to tell everyone with a pulse about the organization. They deserve clarity about which donors and prospects should be the top priority for their attention.

I think we should focus board members

on being ambassadors to these people (in order of importance):

- current top donors or recently lapsed top donors;
- people who have made gifts over several years, regardless of size;
- people who have made small gifts but who have indicated great interest;
- last, people who have connected with our work but are not yet donors.

Only after these connections have been made should board members be asked to focus on people unfamiliar with our work!

And if we’re asking board members to introduce strangers to our mission, we should be clear about what types of people are most likely to give. If there’s a demographic or psychographic profile among your current donors, share that with your leaders so they can find more



people like that. Regardless of your mission, focus board members on prospect pools of people who are already used to giving, such as members of service clubs, members of faith communities, or people who give enthusiastically to their alma mater every year.

If you're asking board members to represent the leadership of your organization at one of your gatherings, tell them precisely who will be there, which donors or prospects deserve board attention, and how you'd like those people approached at that event. You might also initiate a new guideline that board members aren't to talk to one another at donor gatherings. Instead, their job is to work the room, connecting with donors and prospects—not to be a guest at the party. Most important of all, if you're asking board members to introduce people in their circles of influence to your organization, teach them how to watch for lean-in as the prospects learn more about you, and not to push people to give who aren't exhibiting interest.

I once heard a wise board member talking about the concept of social capital. She had spent a lifetime building relationships throughout the community, earning a stellar reputation and the respect of countless people, many of them influential. She said that when nonprofits asked her to

approach her contacts for money, they were asking her to spend her social capital on their behalf. She said she had to think long and hard about whether an organization was really worth her investment, as she was putting her reputation on the line. Are you spending your board members' social capital optimally?

#### *Practice Asking Questions*

It's important to help board members talk more about outcomes than activities, more about stories than statistics, and more about who's served than the organization itself. Even better than *telling* things to prospective donors is training board members to ask open-ended questions. The best way to be a powerful ambassador is to ask others about their relationship to the mission, and then connect your work with the prospect's answers.

Board members can be shown how to ask open-ended questions that elicit clues about how the prospect or donor might connect to the mission. My favorite starters include:

- Tell me about...
- What do you think about...?
- How do you feel about...?

Someone once commented that those are "therapists' questions." It's true. The

reason therapists use them is that they get the other person talking about him- or herself. Then we can listen for how they connect to the mission, rather than us blathering on about things they don't care about. For example, "Tell me how you got introduced to music in your life" or "What do you think about engaging nontraditional audiences with our music?" or "How do you feel about music being dropped in the schools?"

Spend some time at a board meeting crafting a list of open-ended questions that might work for your board leaders. Practice asking them at meetings, then type them up and make sure everyone has copies in preparation for their work as ambassadors.

#### *Teach Them What to Talk About*

Board members also need to know how to articulate what's in it for the prospect to be part of our organization. What tangible

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and intangible benefits can we promise a donor who supports our work? Do they get access to information, people, or gatherings that non-donors don't get? How do our orchestra's results further the donor's personal goals?

Research tells us that there are three things that motivate giving, and board members should understand how to weave

This article is a slightly adapted excerpt from the new edition of Susan Howlett's *Boards on Fire! Inspiring Leaders to Raise Money Joyfully*, and is printed with permission. Look for the new edition of *Boards on Fire!* in early 2019. Visit <https://susanhowlett.com/> or <https://wordandraby.com/> for more information.

them all into their conversations with donors and prospects:

People want to feel appreciated, not just for gifts they've given in the past, but for their values, priorities, and actions in the world.

People want to know that their behavior makes a difference. They need us to draw vivid pictures of what happens when people contribute to our work. Where did that gift land; whose life was touched?

People are yearning for a sense of community or a sense of belonging. Board members can use words like "belong" and "community" and "family" to let them know how being part of your organization will help them connect with a group of people with shared values and shared interests.

### Customize the Message

Board members can also be shown how to tailor messages to different audiences. We know from research published in *The Seven Faces of Philanthropy* by Russ Alan Prince and Karen Maru File that there are different donor types. Board members need to understand what those donor types are, how to spot them, and how to shape a message to meet that type's needs.

For example, one of the types is called an Investor. Investor donors want to hear us use the words "return" or "ROI" ("return on investment"). They want to know there's an audit and a strategic plan. They want to know what our deliverables are, and how we're measuring our success. They want to know that a timely investment in, for instance, at-risk youth will cost us all less than if these young people are incarcerated or on welfare ten years from now. If we don't use words different kinds of people can relate to when we discuss our organization, we might lose them as donors. Spend some time at a board meeting discussing donor types and how to customize your message.

### Engaging the Board in Advocacy

Before we can engage our board members in advocacy, we need to address the deep-seated root causes of people's resistance

or fear. Many of these issues reflect other lessons about fundraising:

- Leaders don't know who they're supposed to prioritize. Does advocacy mean talking with their barber while they're getting a haircut, making a presentation at their Rotary Club, or traveling to the Capitol to speak with lawmakers? Those are really different conversations, and board members shouldn't be left to figure out who the target audience is for their messages.
- By the time community leaders are mature enough to be on a board, they're usually good at what they do, and yet we're asking them to do something they may not be polished at. They're worried about not doing it artfully, about making mistakes, about not knowing the answers to questions that might come up. They may feel like imposters.
- We all have complicated relationships with power, authority, and money. Asking people to speak to those with power can trigger feelings unless we've previously discussed these relationships and come to grips with them.
- Board members may feel ill-equipped to describe a problem and our proposed solution succinctly and powerfully. Most of the issues we deal with are complicated and many-layered, so we need to help board members pare down their messages so they're compelling, without sounding whiny. We should also arm them with vivid images of what it will look like if what we're advocating for *doesn't* happen.

Usually, when we train our leaders to advocate, we emphasize what to tell the other person. We instruct them to explain, inform, educate, convince. We encourage them to lead with their own story. But they'd be much more effective if they engaged the subject by asking questions instead. Rather than wagging their finger and saying, "What you need to under-

stand..." they should be asking the other person about their experience with the topic. We can help our boards practice how to inquire about the other person's opinions or impressions, so we can under-

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stand their position before we charge in with our own.

If we're asking board members to represent us in the community, it's our job to prepare them for that task. They're not going to be good at it on their own.

As you equip your board leaders with the tools they need to be great ambassadors, make sure they're not using negative, violent words when they talk about approaching prospects. Most of the words people use to describe fundraising create a hostile environment. Discourage leaders from using phrases like "hit them up," "twist their arm," "put the squeeze on them," and "lean on your friends," even in lighthearted banter. Instead, encourage words like "approach," "invite," "visit with," or "reach out to."

When board members have been shown how to prioritize with whom they should be visiting, what to talk about with them, and how to hold engaging, other-centered conversations, they will become powerful champions on our behalf. Knowing how best to connect another's passion to the mission gives them the confidence to represent our organizations compellingly. And they will. **S**

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