

The Engaged Board

Introducing a new *Symphony* column aimed at those charged with responsibility for orchestras: the members of the board of directors.

Our inaugural Board Room column is an excerpt from Susan Howlett's *Boards on Fire! Inspiring Leaders to Raise Money Joyfully*, a new manual that helps board members fulfill their responsibilities. The book has gotten people talking about the rewards—and challenges—of governance. At the League's Conference in Seattle this June, Howlett, a leading consultant on nonprofit governance, conducts a session based on the book that helps trustees to meet their fiduciary obligations by raising money with confidence and enthusiasm. In this excerpt from *Boards on Fire!*, Howlett discusses how to get trustees more actively engaged in governance.



Most of the board meetings I attend as a consultant are disappointing. The main reason? The typical meeting structure offers little opportunity for board members to lead. Picture a conference room full of people with skills, talents, contacts, wisdom, experience, and passion for the mission—relegated to listening to a series of boring reports that aren't tied to a common vision or strategic goals. Fundraising is always the last item on the agenda, and it gets abbreviated or postponed because the other items took too long.

Instead of steering the meeting, leaders are leaning back in their chairs with their arms crossed, or furtively checking their messages.

There are many reasons why board meetings have ended up looking like this. One might be that strong executives don't really want their boards very engaged, because they've been burned by micromanagers in the past or they fear that a fired-up board might usurp some of their power.

Mostly, though, I think boring meetings are the result of benign neglect: whoever wants time on the agenda gets it and

there's no overarching rationale for what the board spends its precious time on across the arc of a year.

One thing is for sure, though: no one wants to go out and raise money to fund committee reports.

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Overcoming the Governance Barrier

The antidote to this problem is easy: create an environment where board members get to lead.

In their book *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, authors Dick Chait, Bill Ryan, and Barbara Taylor distinguish three modes in which boards operate: the *fiduciary* mode, the *strategic* mode, and the *generative* mode.

When they're operating in the fiduciary mode, boards are discussing things like budgets and contracts and legal responsibilities. When they're operating in the



strategic mode, they're discussing things like goals and measurable outcomes, the relative merits of a collaboration, or what position to take on a legislative matter. When they're operating in the generative mode, they're temporarily suspending those other two modes, and thinking outside the box about how to address a systemic issue.

When I see boards operating in the fiduciary mode, their heads are down, their pencils are out, and they're looking at fine print, maybe even squinting. When I see boards operating in the strategic mode, they're sitting upright in their chairs, looking at one another. And when they get to the generative mode, they're leaning back in their chairs with their hands behind their heads, saying, "What would happen if we thought about it *this way*?" Their view is beyond the room's walls, and the conversation is animated and engrossing.

If we created more opportunities for boards to have generative conversations, they would find the strategic conversations more contextual and satisfying, and they would lean into the fiduciary conversations eagerly because the financial and legal topics would feel vital to accomplishing the big ideas they created up front.

Fundraising then becomes a natural step in the process of achieving the vision they "birthed" in a generative conversation.

Design Meetings People Look Forward To

Here's how to shift the content of your board meetings so leadership can emerge naturally. Imagine a board meeting with

an agenda that unfolds like this:

1. An opportunity to build community among the board members
2. An inspiring reminder of the organization's mission
3. A vote on a "consent agenda"
4. An opportunity for education or training of board members
5. A generative conversation about a matter of consequence

Let's look at these steps in more detail.

1) First, building community increases accountability. When people don't know or care about the others in the group, they don't feel bad about dropping the ball on their assignments. But people who feel emotionally connected to one another follow through because they don't want to disappoint their peers. Here are some ways to build community:

- Food: I think every board meeting should have food, partly as a gesture of reciprocity because the leaders are volunteering their time, and partly to ensure that people's biological needs are met so they can pay attention. I also think something visceral happens when people break bread together. Some groups rotate the food assignment among board members; others assign food to staff. Check my website for a list of ways to handle food so it isn't a burden to anyone.
- Introductions: Begin your meetings with each person restating their name (I've worked with boards where some people didn't even know their fellow members) and sharing a simple fact about themselves: their favorite movie, their favorite book, their favorite ethnic restaurant, a memorable trip, where they went to high school, or something more mission-related, such as their favorite children's book (literacy), their favorite historic building (preservation), their favorite park or trail, animal, boat, etc. This gives the others a little glimpse into each leader's personal life without taking time out of the meeting.

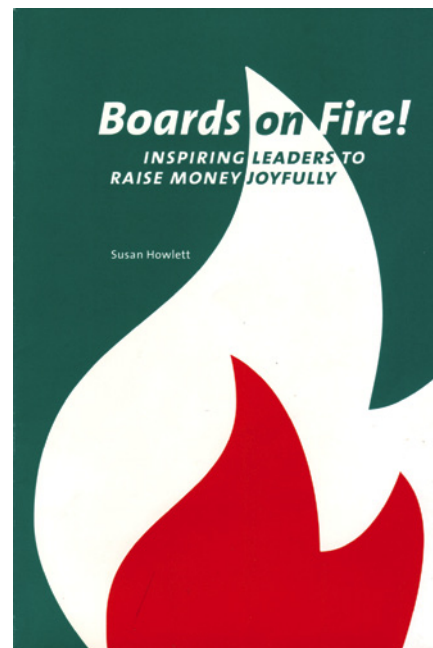
2) Second, it's important to remind people of the group's mission at every meeting to keep their leadership inspired. Sometimes, board members who are deeply engaged in committee work forget to tie that work to the larger mission and vision. In some organizations, I've seen staff share a story about someone who has benefited from their work,

Engage in a deep, rich, satisfying conversation about something that matters, preferably something that relates to your orchestra's strategic goals.

but I think it's more effective to have a board member responsible for the "mission moment." Rotate who shares one of these moments each month (and be sure to make it easy for them to connect with an end user). By learning the story well enough to share it with their peers, it will sink into their hearts and guts and they'll remember it for a long time. At the end of the year, they will have heard enough stories that they'll feel really connected to your mission.

3) Third, with a consent agenda, the staff puts into one document all of the reports and routine items that normally take up meeting time yet don't require board discussion (for example, the CEO's report, finance report, committee reports, or perfunctory ratifications). This document is sent out ahead of time with the expectation that everyone reads it before coming to the meeting. Then all items are voted on at once, becoming the official record of the organization.

A consent agenda eliminates from the agenda anything that already happened in the past and allows the board to spend



the meeting time looking forward and applying their wisdom to important matters. You can find more information about consent agendas at www.susanhowlett.com.

4) Fourth, include 20 minutes of education or training so board members can anticipate learning something germane every time they attend a meeting. Knowing that the organization is investing in their ability to lead well will inspire them to use their newly acquired wisdom and skills. Here are a couple of points to remember:

- Think about *education* in terms of your line of work. Have a staff member or local expert come in to talk about trends or best practices in the field. Invite a board member who knows a lot about something (the legislature, collaboration, a sister organization they used to lead) to share their expertise. Education helps put your work in a larger context so the board can see how your organization fits into the broader community.
- Think about *training* in terms of

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how to be a more effective board member. If no one knows how to read the financial statements, train them on where their eyes should fall on the page and which strategic questions they should be asking. If they don't know how to work a room on your behalf or ask unapologetically for money or auction items, have someone show them how to do it. We need to stop complaining about what leaders do badly and give them the tools to do it better.

5) **Now imagine that those first four agenda items take 30 minutes total. That leaves you a good 60 minutes to engage in a deep, rich, satisfying conversation about something that matters,** preferably something that relates to your strategic goals. Perhaps a task force went away after the strategic planning retreat to hammer out a recommendation on some topic. Give them a few minutes to outline their ideas and then open it up to the whole board to discuss. (A list of topics other organizations have discussed during their generative conversation period, and a great conversation starter—Jan Masaoka's insightful article "Governance and Support"—can be found on my website.)

Good board meetings help leaders feel as if the organization has invested in them, and they've invested in the organization. As meetings engage board members in rich, satisfying conversations about topics that further the mission, vision, and strategic goals, trustees can see how their efforts to raise money affect the organization. When board members are engaged in authentic leadership, they'll be eager to ask for financial support. **S**

This article is excerpted from *Boards on Fire! Inspiring to Leaders to Raise Money Joyfully* by Susan Howlett, and is reprinted by permission of the author. Word and Raby Publishing, www.wordandraby.com. To purchase *Boards on Fire!* and to view other resources, visit www.susanhowlett.com



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