

“Unfreeze Your Board” Tip Sheet

An essential part of a nonprofit board member's job is to support the organization's ability to carry out its mission. One of the primary ways boards accomplish this mandate is by ensuring the organization has enough resources to do the work. Ergo, fundraising.

But while board members understand this part of their charge intellectually, they often throw up innumerable barriers to taking action. They get stuck offering many excuses for “Why It Won't Work.”

Here, in rough priority order, are some suggestions for how to unfreeze a board that's too paralyzed to fundraise.

BUILD THE CASE

- Board members need to know why their fundraising efforts are important and they must come to believe they have to act now. This case must remove any assumptions that someone else (grants from foundations or government) will fill the gap. Especially if the organization has succeeded for years without board member fundraising, creating an argument that has both a clear need and urgency is critical (including, “*What will happen if we don't?*”).
- Board members need to know “why me” – why, as a board member, do I have to reach out? Remind them that the most effective fundraising is personal and “high touch.” They have unique authority with their peers as committed volunteers who know the organization best.
- Tying the case for board fundraising to program is critical – admiration for how the organization helps others was likely an important factor in board members joining in the first place, and connecting back to the excitement of mission will help board members overcome their resistance to asking. Bring mission into every board meeting so board members are reminded about the work's impact and feel connected. (You will also give them better stories to tell.)

CREATE TOOLS

- Board members need the right tools to do the job – like talking points, a case statement, the elevator speech. Don't assume that because board members believe in the mission, they understand the programs well enough to sell them. And don't wait for them to ask – it's the rare board member who's self-aware enough to know they need help.
- Schedule training sessions and get board members to practice friendraising and fundraising – both in board meetings and real life. Have them practice what it feels like to go on a fundraising call – the nervousness, the ability to simultaneously pitch and read a prospect's body language – so once they get there it feels a little more familiar.

CULTIVATE PEOPLE

- Build your relationship with one or two allies on the board who “get it” and are willing to model fundraising behavior for the rest of the board. Ask them to serve as your allies in moving the board – which can range from volunteering for fundraising assignments at board meetings, to calling other members outside of meetings to help them work through their hesitations in private (instead of in front of the whole board, which can snowball into a chorus of objections...)

- Buddy people up – have less seasoned board members partner with more seasoned members. Pair people so that those new to fundraising can watch it being done well. If no one does it well, get someone from another board to come in and model behavior for your board members.
- Add new people – some fresh blood with energy who know from the get-go that fundraising is a part of the job. Be transparent during the recruitment process, and make sure that long-time board members don't soft-pedal the fundraising requirements in their eagerness to snag new people onto the board.

REDEFINE FUNDRAISING

- Start with activities other than asking, including cultivation and thank yous. Fundraising is a matter of confidence as much as anything else – so create assignments that help board members feel they have the capability to do fundraising. If you can build that self-assurance, more complex assignments will come.
- Go for quick wins and build on success. Make fundraising doable for where your board members are, now. They'll get to the end goal (getting and giving) faster if you acknowledge what they're really capable of at this stage of the game, instead of creating overly ambitious goals you wish your board could do but can't.
- Work with each board member to develop a small list of people they will cultivate over the course of the year well before the time they will be solicited for money. Make sure they understand the fundamental principle that plenty of friendraising has to precede fundraising for the gift to be a measure of regard for the organization and not just a *quid pro quo*.
- Establish opportunities for board members to be ambassadors, including house parties and acting as “hosts” at program events. Create a calendar that provides opportunities in every season so that your board members aren't out of luck if they can't make it to the one “friendraiser” produced per year.
- Set goals strategically to lay the basis for board fundraising success, including goals for board member activity as well as accomplishment (e.g. number of board members who bring someone to an event vs. donations received as follow-up to the event). All parts of fundraising need to be celebrated and encouraged by peers on the board, especially by the fundraising committee chair and the board chair.
- Celebrate every action, no matter how small. The name of the game is building confidence. You're trying to change long-established patterns of behavior. Recognize even baby steps as movement – everyone seeks praise – and highlight the board's ability to perform, no matter how small.

Unfreezing a board in fundraising takes patience. If you and your board members only look at the top of the mountain, you will likely be filled with despair at how far you have to go. It seems impossible to you and the board – so board members don't even try. The result? A board that's stuck in place, thinking “Why bother?” because it doesn't have the skills and ability to perform at the top.

The trick is to take one step after another without looking up for a while. Once you do, you will find that these systematic steps, combined, create a board that is now willing to engage in the sometimes-scary, often-exhilarating world of reaching out for funds on behalf of the work they care so deeply about.