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Top Ten Fundraising Myths

1. Myth: “Fundraising is a staff issue.”

Many nonprofit board members assume that raising money is solely the staff’s responsibility. This misconception is so common that it’s listed as my top board “myth.” Board members often believe their role is limited to governance, leaving fundraising to employees. This mindset leads to disengaged boards that don’t actively support the organization’s revenue needs.

Truth: Fundraising is a shared responsibility between board and staff. While staff coordinate development, every board member plays a crucial role in opening doors, making connections, and being an ambassador for the cause. Even if a board member isn’t personally asking for donations, they should be helping by thanking donors, introducing new supporters, and contributing financially themselves. In fact, best practices call for 100% of board members to give and to champion fundraising efforts as part of their fiduciary duty.

2. Myth: “I give my time, so I don’t need to give money.”

This is an all-too-common refrain from board members. For example, a nonprofit CEO described a “deflating” conversation with a board member who refused to participate in fundraising campaigns because “I give my time!” Many trustees mistakenly feel that volunteering their time alone fulfills their obligations, using it as a reason to avoid making personal donations.

Truth: Every board member must “give or get” – meaning make a meaningful personal donation and/or help secure gifts – to lead by example. Board service “requires their time,” and it requires their financial support. In fact, the unequivocal answer to whether board members must give even if they volunteer is “yes.” Personal “treasure” is a critical part of board duties; it ensures board members have skin in the game and demonstrates commitment to other donors. A culture of philanthropy starts at the top, so a board that only gives time but not money is failing to meet sector-wide best practice.

3. Myth: “Only wealthy or well-connected people can fundraise effectively.”

Board members who aren’t personally affluent or don’t have rich contacts often feel they can’t contribute to fundraising. It’s common to hear objections like, “I don’t know anyone who has money.” This myth leads boards to undervalue members without deep pockets, assuming that without wealth or celebrity connections, they have no fundraising value.

Truth: Philanthropy knows no bounds – every board member can make a difference regardless of their income level or rolodex. Generosity is widespread (over 70% of Americans give to charity), and small and mid-size donations collectively have a huge impact. Boards need diverse skills, not just “deep pockets”: strategic thinkers, community advocates, and subject-matter experts also attract support. In fact, many nonprofits emphasize that wealth and connections are not the only value a board member brings. Broadening your base is key – a passionate board member who shares the mission with others can inspire donations of all sizes. Every contribution matters, and “every individual has the power to make a difference, regardless of their financial status.” Small gifts add up when combined from a passionate community.

4. Myth: “Board members shouldn’t ask their friends for money.”

Some trustees feel it’s improper or uncomfortable to solicit people they know. They fear straining friendships by “hitting up their friends” for donations. As one fundraising expert notes, “I don’t want to ask my friends” is a common objection among boards. This myth can lead to missed opportunities, since board members’ personal networks often include ideal supporters of the cause.

Truth: Friends and family often want to support the causes that matter to you. Board members should remember that those close to them typically share their values. Far from being offended, many friends feel proud to see someone they know volunteering and will gladly help them succeed. When approached in a respectful way, your friends are likely to respond positively – they care about you and your mission. Rather than damaging relationships, giving friends a chance to support your work can deepen those relationships, as they become partners in a cause you mutually care about.

5. Myth: “Fundraising is just about making ‘the ask.’”

Many board members reduce fundraising to the moment of solicitation – essentially, “just asking people for money.” They may equate fundraising with a single transaction, not realizing the groundwork involved. Indeed, some boards think fundraising = asking = one uncomfortable moment. In reality, experts frequently debunk this, noting that board members often mistakenly think fundraising is only the ask and overlook the relationship-building that leads up to it.

Truth: Fundraising is far more than one direct ask – it's an ongoing process of building relationships. Just like a marriage proposal isn't spontaneous but the result of a cultivated relationship, fundraising success depends on the cultivation and stewardship leading up to (and following) the ask. Storytelling, donor care, and aligning the cause with a donor's passions are critical. In practice, 90% of fundraising is not the moment of asking but the work done before and after it. Successful fundraisers "require building genuine relationships and narrating compelling stories that resonate with potential donors," not just confidently making an ask. The bottom line: focus on connecting people to the mission and inviting them into a community, rather than seeing fundraising as a simple money request.

6. Myth: "Asking for money is basically begging – it's awkward and will make everyone feel bad."

Fear of fundraising often boils down to this myth. Board members sometimes see fundraising as a distasteful act of begging or arm-twisting. This misconception is a major reason boards resist fundraising – they don't want to feel like beggars imposing on others.

Truth: When done right, fundraising is inviting people to be part of something good – it should feel rewarding, not like begging. Donating actually brings joy to donors; research shows that giving triggers the same "feel-good" endorphins as winning a prize. As one fundraising veteran puts it, "Giving is the neurological equivalent of winning the lottery," releasing endorphins and oxytocin (the "feel-good" hormone) in donors' brains. Far from feeling bothered, donors often feel honored and happy to be asked to make the world better. Fundraising, at its heart, is not about money—it's about love of humanity (the literal meaning of "philanthropy"). By asking for support, you are offering someone the opportunity to fulfill their own values. In short, a well-crafted ask is a gift to the donor.

7. Myth: "Fundraising isn't really part of our mission; we're here to provide programs, not raise money."

Some boards draw a hard line between "mission work" and fundraising, treating the latter as a necessary evil or a separate, ancillary task. They might say, "We're in the business of service, not sales," implying that focusing on money sullies the mission. This myth leads to underinvestment in development because board members believe pursuing the mission and pursuing funds are unrelated or even at odds.

Truth: Fundraising is mission-critical – it's what makes the mission possible. Programs don't run on goodwill alone. If your mission is to change the world, inviting donors to fund that work is an integral part of achieving the mission, not a distraction. In fact, engaging donors expands your impact by involving more people in your cause. Board members must recognize that raising resources is not separate from mission – it's how you empower the mission. When board members embrace fundraising as mission work, they see that bringing in funding is simply another way of advancing the cause.

8. Myth: "Big fundraising events (galas, auctions, etc.) are the best way to raise money."

Boards often love high-profile special events. Galas are visible and exciting, so some directors assume that throwing a big annual event is the optimal fundraising strategy – or even that an event can substitute for year-round fundraising. Many nonprofits "live or die by special events," often at board insistence. This myth persists despite the fact that events can be inefficient.

Truth: Events are the most costly, risky dollars you'll ever raise – they have their place, but they're rarely the most cost-effective strategy. Special events typically consume huge staff and volunteer time and expense. On average, a charity gala might net only 50–65 cents on the dollar after costs. Moreover, event income is unpredictable (one bad weather day or a competing event can tank revenues). Over-reliance on events is like putting all your money in one volatile stock – it's risky and not sustainable. Diversified fundraising (individual giving, major donors, etc.) is more reliable.

9. Myth: "We just need one big donor (or a famous celebrity) to fund everything – just ask Oprah (or Bill Gates)!"

This "silver bullet" myth is tempting: board members fantasize that a single wealthy benefactor could swoop in and solve the nonprofit's financial needs. It's not uncommon to hear a well-meaning board member suggest, "Why don't we just reach out to [rich celebrity/philanthropist] for a donation? For them it'd be pocket change!" While appealing, this idea is usually unrealistic. In most cases, that big-name donor has no connection to your organization, making this approach a long shot.

Truth: "Just find a rich donor!" is not a viable fundraising plan – major gifts happen through relationships, not cold calls to billionaires. Wealth alone does not equal willingness to give, and huge donors are highly strategic about their philanthropy. "Wealth is no indicator of generosity. Capacity does not indicate propensity to give. It doesn't matter that a billionaire loves early childhood education if you have no contact that opens the door. Additionally, pinning hopes on one donor is dangerously risky – even if you land them, dependence on a single funder can leave you high and dry if they stop giving. The healthier approach is to cultivate many supporters across different levels. Sustainable funding comes from broad, diversified support, not a one-off windfall. The truth is, there's no shortcut: meaningful contributions flow from genuine relationships and consistent effort, not magic solutions.

10. Myth: "If a donor gives to us, they won't be able to give elsewhere – there's only so much to go around."

Board members sometimes fall for the "myth of scarcity" – the idea that charitable giving is a zero-sum game. They worry that asking someone for a donation will detract from that person’s ability to support other causes, or that the philanthropic pie is fixed. For instance, a board member might hesitate to solicit a gift because they think, “If our donor gives to us, they might not give to their alma mater or another charity.” In the same vein, some fear that a big campaign (like the viral ALS Ice Bucket Challenge) sucked up donor dollars that would have gone elsewhere.

Truth: Generosity isn’t a zero-sum finite resource – donors frequently give to multiple causes, and giving to one doesn’t preclude giving to others. This was vividly demonstrated during the famous Ice Bucket Challenge: over $100 million was raised for ALS in 2014 without cannibalizing other charities’ donations. In fact, studies showed that those gifts were additive – donors who gave to ALS did not stop giving to their usual charities.