Beyond Giving and Getting: The Board's Role in Fundraising as Ministry

by Rebekah Burch Basinger

Questions about the board's role in fundraising are almost always met with a cryptic, three-word response — give and get. And while there's no denying that all board members should gladly share their finances and their networks with the organizations they serve, the oft-repeated mantra confuses the responsibility of individual board members with the work of the board as a corporate entity. In short, too many board members and CEOs misunderstand the board's role in fundraising because they've been given the wrong answer to a very important question.

If the ultimate goal for the development effort is to glorify God and bring people into a closer relationship with Him through the experience of giving, the boards' role centers around four critical issues that go well beyond this year's fund-raising goals.

The first and most important issue to which a board must give attention is educating itself to the principles of and requirements for a ministry-centered development program. An executive director described attempts to win over board members to fundraising as ministry by saying, "I might as well be speaking another language." And she's right. The idea of fundraising as a faith building activity doesn't make sense unless the men and women on the board have experienced their own hearts growing bigger as a result of joyful giving. Sadly, too few board members report this sort kind of "heart growth." Worse still, there are individuals on the boards of Christian organizations whose hearts have actually grown less generous because of the fund-raising strategies employed by well-intentioned but ill-informed ministries. It's no surprise that board members look on fundraising as an unpleasant but necessary part of doing business and have trouble re-visioning the development program as an extension of the organization's mission and ministry.

If the board is expected to support a different way of thinking about fundraising, it is crucial that individual board members be introduced to a fuller understanding of what can be accomplished through the organization's development efforts. A helpful step in this direction is for the CEO and board chair to design a study plan. A well-rounded board education effort includes a review of biblical and theological teachings about money and faith along with opportunities for board members to share personal stories of what giving has meant to their walk with God. Although some board members may initially be uncomfortable with all this money talk, when pursued over time, these discussions can transform a board's thinking about the fund-raising program.

Along with a faith and money study plan, it is also helpful for boards to keep track of comments and questions about the fundraising program that come up during the general board session. If references to organizational needs and meeting goals, as well as complaints about competition with other ministries and other references to scarcity dominate boardroom discussions, this is a clue more work needs to be done in educating the board to fundraising as ministry. When the board defines success of the fund-raising program solely by the bottom line, it is not likely that development staff – or others within the organization — will feel encouraged to make the spiritual needs of donors a high priority. The actions and words of theologically astute board members, on the other hand, make clear that it is possible to pay attention to donor hearts without compromising the organization's bottom line.

Next, the board should turn its attention to organizational attitudes and assumptions about the fundraising program. After working through their own understanding of what the organization can – and should – accomplish through its fundraising efforts, board members are ready to listen to what staff and key volunteers have to say about the development program. Every organization has its "money myths," and it's crucial that the board be aware of the assumptions – both right and wrong — that inform internal thinking about finances. Persons who've been with a ministry for many years may assume that funding patterns continue as was the case when he or she first started on the job, and they pass these assumptions along to newcomers. Staff whose duties don't include attention to an organization's budget are often ignorant to the realities of what it takes to fund the ministry. Without proper education, staff members can make unkind comments about donor motivations and the methods and messages used by the fund-raising team. After educating themselves to the ins and outs of a quality, ministry-centered development effort, the board should join the CEO in shaping an education program for the inside folks.

Because so much of what the development staff does is external to the organization, the fundraisers' work is often a mystery to program staff. Board members should stand with the chief executive in helping others within the organization appreciate the importance of development activities that build up donors' hearts. This is especially important when it comes to setting the budget for fundraising. Program staff can be resentful or question the wisdom of directing precious ministry dollars toward fundraising. But the simple truth of the matter is that it takes money to raise money, and especially so if fundraising is to be carried out as ministry.

It's a blot on a ministry's public witness when one development officer after another is burned out by unrealistic expectations and insufficient resources to get the job done. The boards' role is to determine appropriate expenditures for fund-raising – even if that determination may not go down well with everyone within the organization – and then to monitor the use of those funds to ensure that development goals are met in ways that encourage donors in the life of faith.

Third, the board needs to assure itself that fund-raising goals communicate the "right" messages to donors. The surest evidence that a board understands its role in shaping a ministry-centered fund-raising program is found in the goals it helps set. Faith-encouraging goals reflect an understanding of the difference between targets that challenge supporters to stretch themselves on behalf of the ministry and goals that are simply beyond the ability of a constituency to achieve. While it is good to aim high, too great expectations almost always lead to frustration, dashed hopes, and failed programs. This is not the way to encourage God's work in donors' hearts.

A key role of the board is to stand with the CEO in saying "no" to some good opportunities. All proposed new initiatives should be tested against the organization's stated plans. Possible activities must support previously agreed upon goals, and the constituency must also be able to fund the goals. The conventional approaches to fund development tend to focus on the current needs and future plans of the organization. As fundraisers are pressured with ever more ambitious funding goals, the larger vision of fundraising as a means of advancing God's kingdom can be lost.

In contrast, a ministry-centered approach to fund development puts the emphasis on God at work in donors' hearts. Standard # 7 of the ECFA Standards of Responsible Stewardship is a useful guide when thinking about faith-encouraging goal setting. The standard also suggests the kinds of policies necessary to guide solicitation, receipt and acknowledgement of gifts to the organization. In the area of fund-raising, board policies are not simply rules to be followed but are actually theological statements that embody organizational attitudes about desired outcomes in donor hearts.

Finally, the board needs to encourage the CEO to hire and nurture fundraisers who understand their work as ministry. I recently overhead a board member urging the executive director of a mid-sized ministry to look for a fundraiser "who's not afraid to twist some arms – who knows how to turn up the heat. Christian is great, but we need money!" Fortunately, as the executive director understood, competence and Christian commitment are not mutually exclusive. If an organization is looking for a "messiah" who can save the program with his or her fund-raising skills, the leadership will surely be disappointed. Skills may be transferable, but success in fundraising is about much more than skills.

This is not to suggest that finding the "right" development team is an easy thing. But to ignore the importance of matching the personal faith commitments of the prospective fundraiser with the theological underpinnings of the organization is a grave mistake. Donors and other friends of the ministry are quick to pick up on a disconnect between the public messages of the organization and private conversations with a development officer. When a prospect's faith commitment is added to the equation, the search process becomes all the more challenging. Insiders can become impatient with a lengthy search process or seemingly unnecessary questions about the faith commitment of applicants. It's the boards role to encourage the CEO to devote the extra time and care needed to recruit first-rate fundraisers who understands their work as ministry.

Money is necessary to support mission, and the giving record of board members does set the pace for other donors to follow. But when the goal of the development program is bigger and bolder than organizational needs – when the goal encompasses God at work in donor hearts, the board's contribution is far greater than the sum total of individual gifts of time, talent and treasure. And it can't be described in just three words. The answer is found in attention to scripture, personal sharing and careful, prayerful attention to organizational practice. Most important, the boards' role in fundraising is grounded in a commitment to growing givers' hearts right along with growing the ministry.

This article appeared in Summer 2003 issue of *Focus on Accountability: A Publication of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.*