

From Passive to Proactive: Strategies to Move Nonprofit Board Members Beyond Meetings and Into Action

By Sabrina Walker Hernandez

Moving board members from passive to proactive requires intentionality. By setting clear expectations, providing meaningful opportunities, and fostering a culture of philanthropy, organizations can activate their board as a powerful force for impact.

An engaged board is the heartbeat of a thriving nonprofit. Yet, too often, board engagement stalls at attending meetings and reviewing reports. To truly support an organization's mission, board members must shift from passive participants to proactive leaders — championing fundraising, strategic planning, and governance.



1. Set Clear Expectations from the Start

Nonprofit board engagement begins with clarity. When board members understand their roles beyond attending meetings, they are more likely to step up.

- **Create a Board Member Agreement:** Outline expectations for fundraising, advocacy, and committee involvement. Have members sign it annually as a commitment to active participation. But don't just sign it and forget it — revisit it quarterly or biannually. This will also keep down your frustration of saying, "We have the agreement," and then realizing they don't follow it. When you revisit it annually, tie it into your annual meeting practice so it remains consistent. I introduced this in my organization and saw immediate improvements — board members felt accountable and empowered.
- **Design a Strong Onboarding Process:** Provide a structured orientation that includes fundraising training, governance responsibilities, and mission alignment. I once had a board member tell me, "I didn't know fundraising was part of my role!" After revamping our onboarding, that changed.
- **Use a Board Engagement Matrix:** Assess individual participation in key areas — attendance, fundraising, strategic input — and identify gaps. When I implemented this tool, we quickly spotted underperforming areas and were able to provide targeted support.

2. Shift the Mindset from Governance to Impact

Many board members see their role as oversight rather than action. A culture shift is needed.

- **Move from "Board of Directors" to "Board of Ambassadors":** Board members should be vocal advocates, consistently sharing the organization's impact in their networks. When I led a \$12 million capital campaign, board members who acted as ambassadors made the biggest difference. Their enthusiasm brought in major donors.
- **Eliminate the "Fundraising Fear":** Fundraising isn't just about asking for money — it's about opening doors. Board members can participate by identifying donors, making introductions, and stewarding relationships.
- **Make Meetings Mission-Focused:** Start meetings with a mission moment — share a client success story or testimonial to reinforce why the board's work matters.

3. Create Meaningful Engagement Opportunities

Nonprofit board members disengage when they don't see where they fit. Assign roles that align with their strengths.

- **Strategic Planning Contributors:** Involve board members in developing long-term goals and initiatives. Board members increased commitment when they had a voice in shaping an organization's vision.
- **Committee Champions:** Whether on finance, governance, or fundraising committees, give them ownership of projects with clear outcomes. Our fundraising committee, led by a committed board member, played a critical role in securing sponsorships.
- **Special Project Leads:** Engage members in specific initiatives such as corporate sponsorship outreach or donor appreciation events. One of our board members, a business executive, spearheaded a corporate partnership drive that brought in five new sponsors.

4. Foster a Culture of Fundraising

A culture of philanthropy starts at the top. Board members must embrace their role in resource development.

- **Educate, Don't Expect:** Provide training on donor engagement and equip board members with talking points about the organization's impact. I led a fundraising workshop for my board, and afterward, one member secured a \$25,000 gift just by telling our story effectively.
- **The "Door Opener" Strategy:** Not every board member has to ask for donations, but they can connect the right people to the organization. One of my most successful fundraisers came from a board member simply introducing me to the right person.
- **Celebrate Fundraising Wins:** Recognize board members who successfully introduce new donors or secure sponsorships. At our meetings, we publicly acknowledged fundraising contributions — it motivated others to get involved.

5. Strengthen Board-Staff Relationships

A disconnect between board members and staff leads to disengagement. Create intentional opportunities for collaboration.

- **Schedule Board-Staff Meetups:** Facilitate informal interactions between board members and staff to build relationships and trust. I initiated quarterly lunches, and they became a game-changer for engagement.
- **Encourage Board Members to Attend Programs:** Seeing the mission in action fosters deeper investment. One board member who attended a youth mentoring session became one of our biggest advocates.
- **Implement a Board Buddy System:** Pair new board members with experienced members to increase retention and engagement. When we launched this, new members got up to speed faster and felt more connected.

6. Recognize and Appreciate Contributions

Engagement thrives in an environment of appreciation. Acknowledging board members' efforts reinforces their value.

- **Public Recognition:** Highlight board contributions in newsletters, social media, and events. I regularly spotlighted board members, and it boosted morale and engagement.
- **Exclusive Gatherings:** Host an annual board appreciation event or retreat. Our end-of-year board appreciation dinner became a cherished tradition.
- **Personalized Thanks:** A simple handwritten note or call from the CEO goes a long way in sustaining engagement. I made a habit of calling board members to thank them personally, and it strengthened our relationships.

The Bottom Line: Engagement is a Culture, Not a Task

Moving nonprofit board members from passive to proactive requires intentionality. By setting clear expectations, providing meaningful opportunities, and fostering a culture of philanthropy, organizations can activate their board as a powerful force for impact.

Engaged boards don't just sit in meetings - they drive missions forward