

When Boards Are Hesitant to Make the Ask

Under the Elm • Discussion 2

1. The Hesitation Is Real — and It Has a Name

Board hesitancy around fundraising is one of the most consistently reported challenges in the nonprofit sector — and one of the least directly addressed. Executive directors dance around it. Board chairs acknowledge it in private. Development consultants document it. And then everyone moves on without resolving it.

The hesitation has a name: role ambiguity. Most board members do not know what they are actually being asked to do when someone says "fundraising." They imagine cold calls, awkward pitches, and ruined friendships. They were not recruited for that, they are not trained for that, and they are not comfortable doing that.

The solution is not to push harder. It is to reframe the role entirely.

"Board members who understand their role don't avoid the ask. Board members who don't understand it avoid everything."

2. What Board Members Are Actually Afraid Of

The Fear of Damaging a Relationship

The number-one reason board members avoid asking is the belief that asking will cost them a friendship or professional relationship. This fear is understandable. It is also largely unfounded — when the ask is made properly, in the context of a genuine relationship and a compelling case.

The Fear of Rejection on Behalf of the Organization

Board members take a "no" personally. If a colleague declines the ask, the board member often experiences it as a reflection of their own judgment or standing. Building resilience around rejection is a trainable skill that most boards never develop.

The Fear of Not Knowing Enough

Many board members stay silent because they are afraid of being asked a question they can't answer. A simple, well-structured board briefing — covering the case, the campaign, the financials, and the top three prospect questions — eliminates this barrier immediately.

3. Reframing the Board's Fundraising Role

Stop asking board members to "raise money." Start asking them to do three specific things: open doors, attend cultivation events, and tell their story of why they serve.

Opening a door means making an introduction — connecting a prospect to the executive director or development staff. The board member does not make the ask. They make the introduction. This is almost always something board members are willing to do when the request is specific.

Cultivation events give board members a structured, low-pressure opportunity to deepen relationships with prospects in a mission-focused context. Their presence adds credibility. Their role is host, not solicitor.

Telling their personal story of why they serve is the most powerful fundraising act a board member can perform — and it requires no script, no pitch, and no close.

"The most effective fundraising board is not one that makes asks. It is one that opens every door and tells the truth about why they believe."

4. What to Do This Quarter

- Hold a board retreat session on "what fundraising actually looks like for you"
- Create a menu of fundraising participation options — from introductions to event hosting to personal notes

- Identify five board members who are willing to open one door each in the next 60 days
- Brief every board member on the top three questions prospects ask — and the answers
- Track board engagement on a simple dashboard and share it at every board meeting

5. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

Board members who feel equipped, supported, and clear about their role do not avoid fundraising. They engage in it — sometimes enthusiastically.

The burden of clarity belongs to organizational leadership. Give your board the tools, the framing, and the permission to participate in the way that fits them best. The results will follow.

Field Note: *One social services organization restructured its board fundraising expectations using a participation menu instead of a single ask requirement. Within two board cycles, 78% of board members had opened at least one donor introduction — up from 22% under the previous model.*