

# How to Have the Giving Conversation Without Damaging the Relationship

*Under the Elm • Discussion 5*

## 1. The Conversation Most Leaders Dread

The board giving conversation is the one that executive directors and board chairs consistently rank as the most uncomfortable in nonprofit leadership. More uncomfortable than a budget shortfall conversation. More uncomfortable than a personnel issue. More uncomfortable than a strategic disagreement.

The discomfort is understandable. You are asking people you respect — people who are giving their time, their reputation, and their governance energy to your organization — to also give their personal financial resources. It feels like too much to ask.

It is not. In fact, it is one of the most important asks you will ever make. And it can be done in a way that strengthens the relationship rather than straining it — if it is done correctly.

*“The giving conversation is not a transaction. It is an invitation to deeper partnership.”*

## 2. Why the Conversation Goes Wrong

### It Happens Too Late

When the giving conversation is deferred until the organization is in financial distress, it arrives with urgency and desperation attached. Board members feel leveraged rather than invited. The timing poisons the message. The conversation should happen early, during onboarding, and be revisited annually — not when the budget is stressed.

## It Is Generic Instead of Personal

A blanket announcement that "all board members are expected to give at a meaningful level" is not a giving conversation. It is a policy statement. The actual conversation — the one that moves people — is personal, one-to-one, and tied to the specific board member's connection to the mission.

## It Conflates Giving With Judgment

The biggest mistake in the board giving conversation is allowing the amount to carry moral weight. A board member who gives \$500 because that is genuinely what they can do is not less committed than a board member who gives \$50,000. The conversation must honor financial diversity on the board while still holding a clear expectation of participation.

## 3. How to Have the Conversation Well

The most effective board giving conversation is a one-to-one conversation between the board chair and each individual member, conducted as part of the annual board review cycle. It is not a solicitation call. It is a stewardship conversation that includes a giving component.

The structure is simple: begin with appreciation for the member's contributions of time and leadership; share a specific impact story from the past year; connect that impact to donor investment; and then ask directly — "As we plan our development program for the coming year, I want to make sure I understand your giving plans. What would a meaningful gift look like for you this year?"

The question invites. It does not demand. And it creates space for the board member to answer honestly — whether that answer is a dollar amount, a conversation about capacity, or a request to revisit later.

*"Ask with confidence. Receive with grace. The way you handle the answer matters as much as the ask itself."*

#### 4. What to Do This Quarter

- Develop a board giving policy that specifies participation expectations without mandating a dollar amount
- Train your board chair on the one-to-one giving conversation structure
- Conduct individual giving conversations with every board member before the fiscal year begins
- Create a board giving dashboard that tracks participation rate (not amounts) and share it with the full board
- Recognize and celebrate 100% board participation publicly with donors and in grant applications

#### 5. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

The organizations with 100% board giving are not the ones with the wealthiest boards. They are the ones with the clearest expectations, the most personal conversations, and the most gracious leadership.

Have the conversation. Have it early. Have it one at a time. The relationship will survive it — and often emerge stronger on the other side.

**Field Note:** *One workforce development nonprofit increased board giving participation from 55% to 100% in a single fiscal year by implementing individual-giving conversations with every board member in the first quarter. The average board gift increased by 34% as a secondary outcome of the more personal approach.*