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When Your Board Says They're Engaged — But the Work Says Otherwise

Under the Elm • Discussion 3

1. The Engagement Gap Is Real

Board members who describe themselves as highly engaged while consistently missing deadlines, skipping calls, and failing to follow through on commitments are not being dishonest. They are describing their intentions, not their behaviors. The gap between the two is one of the most persistent and costly problems in nonprofit governance.

The engagement gap produces a specific kind of organizational paralysis. Leadership cannot plan around board members they cannot count on. Staff compensate by taking on work that belongs to the board. And the organization quietly lowers its expectations until the board's functional role is almost entirely ceremonial.

Closing the engagement gap requires naming it — clearly, directly, and without apology.

> *"Good intentions do not open donor doors. Kept commitments do."*

2. Why the Gap Exists

Unclear Expectations at Recruitment

Most board members are recruited with a general pitch about mission and community impact. The specific time commitment, fundraising expectation, and meeting attendance requirement are either glossed over or not mentioned at all. When there is no clear agreement, there is no accountability.

No Mechanism for Accountability

Many boards have no formal process for tracking member performance against expectations. Without a board engagement scorecard, a participation dashboard, or an annual commitment conversation, disengagement has no consequences — and no correction.

The Executive Director Won't Have the Conversation

In most cases, the person who most needs to address a board member's disengagement — the executive director or board chair — avoids doing so out of concern for the relationship. The avoidance is understandable. The cost of it is not.

3. How to Address It Without Losing the Relationship

The most effective tool for closing the engagement gap is the individual board member conversation — conducted annually, one on one, by the board chair. The conversation is not punitive. It is clarifying. It reviews the commitments the member made, documents what was and was not fulfilled, and asks directly: What would make this role more meaningful and sustainable for you in the year ahead?

This conversation accomplishes two things simultaneously. It creates accountability. And it creates an opening for a board member who has become disengaged to recommit — or to step down gracefully.

> *"The board member conversation your chair is avoiding is the one that will determine whether your board is an asset or a liability next year."*

4. What to Do This Quarter

- Draft a board member expectations document that specifies attendance, giving, and engagement requirements
- Implement a quarterly board engagement dashboard and share it with the full board
- Schedule individual board member conversations with the board chair this cycle
- Create an off-ramp process — a dignified, relational path for members who are no longer the right fit

- Recognize and celebrate board members who consistently exceed expectations publicly

5. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

A governance body where low engagement has no consequences and high engagement has no recognition is a governance body in decline. The standard you accept is the standard you establish.

Set the expectation. Have the conversation. Hold the line. The board — and the organization — will be stronger for it.

> **Field Note:** *One regional foundation implemented a board scorecard and annual member review process. Within 18 months, two chronically disengaged members transitioned off the board, three new high-performing members were recruited to fill the seats, and board-generated prospect introductions increased by 180%.*