

Getting Unstuck: When Development Efforts Stall

Under the Elm • Discussion 1

1. Stalled Is Not Failed

Every development program stalls. The question is not whether it will happen, but whether your organization has the diagnostic capacity to understand why — and the leadership will to do something about it.

A stalled development effort is not a staffing problem, a messaging problem, or a prospect problem. It is almost always a structural problem. Something in the system — the strategy, the team alignment, the board engagement, or the case for support — has broken down. Until that root cause is identified, activity will continue without progress.

The first and most important step is to stop treating symptoms and start identifying the system failure beneath them.

“Motion without momentum is not fundraising. It is exhaustion with a budget line.”

2. The Four Most Common Causes of a Stalled Program

The Case Has Stopped Resonating

A case for support that worked three years ago may no longer reflect the community's urgency or the donor's evolving priorities. If your top prospects are saying they'll think about it — and then going quiet — your case is the first place to look.

The Pipeline Is Actually Empty

Many organizations mistake activity for cultivation. If your major gift pipeline consists of the same 12 names it had 18 months ago, with no new prospects being identified and qualified, the program will stall regardless of how many calls are being made.

Board Engagement Has Become Ceremonial

A board that attends meetings but does not open relationships, make introductions, or participate in cultivation events is not a development asset. It is a development ceiling. The program cannot grow past what the board is willing to engage.

Leadership Is Conflict-Avoidant About the Ask

In many stalled programs, the real issue is that no one is actually asking. Calls are being made, lunches are being had, proposals are being written — but the ask itself is being deferred. Indefinitely. This is the most uncomfortable diagnosis and the most common one.

3. The Diagnostic Conversation

Before you restructure the team, revise the case, or hire a consultant, sit down with your development director and your board chair and ask three direct questions: Who are the top ten prospects we should be moving right now? What is the status of each relationship and what is the specific next step? What is preventing us from taking that step?

The answers will tell you everything you need to know about where the stall lives.

“The best development audit is a direct conversation about the ten names that matter most.”

4. What to Do This Quarter

- Conduct a pipeline audit — list every prospect over \$10,000 and categorize by stage and next action

- Identify the three relationships that are closest to a gift and assign a specific ask date
- Schedule a board development committee meeting focused entirely on prospect introductions
- Revisit your case for support — have three major donors read it and tell you what's missing
- Commit to one new major gift ask per week for the next 90 days — on the calendar, with accountability

5. A Final Thought for the Forward-Looking Leader

A stalled program is not a verdict. It is a signal. The organizations that break through are the ones that treat that signal seriously — not defensively — and are willing to be honest about what the data is telling them.

Momentum is rebuilt the same way it is lost: one decision at a time.

Field Note: *One mid-sized arts organization conducted a 30-day pipeline audit and discovered that 60% of their active prospects had not received a personal contact in more than six months. A structured re-engagement plan, implemented over one quarter, resulted in three closed gifts totaling \$340,000.*