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INDICE PHILANTHROPIQUE · LES AFFAIRES

Philanthropy: If Your Board Members Don't Support Your Cause, Who Will?

Philanthropie et CA: si vous ne donnez pas à votre cause, pourquoi les autres le feraient-ils?

May 27, 2026 · By Daniel H. Lanteigne

There are conversations that many boards of directors carefully avoid. This is one of them.

Yes, the directors of a charity should give to the cause they govern. And no, that shouldn't be controversial. Or even "up for debate." For decades in philanthropy, the reasoning has been simple and self-evident. How can an organization ask the public to believe in its mission enough to make a donation, if its own board members don't even do it themselves?

You can spin it however you like. In the end, a board that doesn't financially support its own organization sends a very bad signal—especially when it's soliciting major donors, foundations or corporations.

Because one figure comes up again and again in philanthropic best practices: 100% board participation. Not 60%. Not 75%.

100%.

A Big Unspoken Truth

The problem is that this expectation often exists without ever being truly owned. It's whispered. It's implied. It's hoped for.

But is it spelled out in black and white in the board's policies? In the bylaws? In the responsibilities of directors? Is it clearly explained before someone agrees to join the board? Too often, no.

And that's where the discomfort begins. Because many board members arrive at the table without knowing that a financial contribution is implicitly expected. Then, a few months later, the pressure appears, subtly. Ticket purchases. The annual campaign. A quiet follow-up. Widespread awkwardness.

A board of directors should never operate on implicit expectations. If you believe a board member should give (and it would be surprising if you didn't), say so clearly from the moment of recruitment. Period.

The Amount Matters Less Than the Gesture

Naturally, this opens up another delicate question: how much? And here, many boards make life needlessly complicated for themselves. The real issue probably isn't the amount. It's the gesture.

Because between a retired board member, a young professional, a millionaire entrepreneur or a public figure, financial capacity will never be the same.

The goal isn't to turn a board of directors into a checkbook competition. The goal is to demonstrate real commitment to the mission.

A symbolic personal gift can be enough. A contribution secured through one's network works too. What matters, in the end, is that the board member genuinely takes part in the philanthropic effort of the organization they govern.

And this idea is far from new.

In the North American philanthropic world, the logic of "give or get"—give yourself or bring in others who will—has long been embedded in many boards of directors. Not as a constraint, but as a concrete demonstration of commitment to the mission.

Not the Executive Director's Job

But there's another problem we talk about far less. In many organizations, this conversation ends up falling on the shoulders of the executive director. It's up to her to remind everyone of best practices. To follow up with board members. To explain expectations. To navigate the awkwardness.

Even though she is, ultimately, an employee reporting to the board of directors itself.

This dynamic is more than awkward—it's unhealthy. It isn't the executive director's job to beg her own board members for philanthropic engagement. It's up to the board of directors to have that discussion among peers, in a mature, transparent, and forthright way.

In other words, this is a governance matter. Not an internal fundraising campaign awkwardly delegated to the executive team.

Giving Without Compromising Independence

That said, an important nuance deserves to be heard.

In a recent exchange, Jean-François Henri, academic director at the Collège des administrateurs de sociétés, rightly pointed out that mandating a donation can become tricky—particularly if the size of the contribution ends up influencing independence or the dynamic among board members.

And he's right to raise that risk.

The role of board member and the role of donor aren't identical. A board of directors should never become a club reserved for those who can afford to pay for their seat at the table.

But acknowledging that risk doesn't mean avoiding the conversation altogether. Quite the opposite.

It means every board of directors should have the courage to openly discuss its expectations, its values and its philanthropic culture.

Because in the end, a board that refuses to even contribute to its own mission shouldn't be surprised when donors hesitate to do so as well.

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