In the March/April (2006) issue of the Journal, the article, “The Elephant in the Board Room: Round One,” looked at the functioning of boards of small nonprofit organization (budgets of less than $2 million). We identified the problem that by law, nonprofits must be governed by a board of directors, but that most boards do not function well, to the frustration of both board members and staff. We explored some current thinking about the management and governance responsibilities of boards, suggested some new ways that boards might function more effectively, and invited reader response. The reflections in this article from Journal editor Stephanie Roth are followed by letters on the topic from some readers and a follow-up article by Kim Klein, “The Elephant in the Board Room: Round Two.” You can download “Round One” here: www.grassrootsfundraising.org/magazine/feature25_2.pdf.

In the spirit of continuing the discussion about nonprofit boards that began with the article “The Elephant in the Board Room” in the March/April issue of the Journal, I offer the following thoughts from the perspective of a board member. Based on my board experiences with various organizations over the past 20+ years, I reflect primarily on the issue of the board’s role in fundraising, one of those ongoing challenges for most organizations I know. This is an issue that is usually about more than what appears on the surface.

REFRAMING THE FUNDRAISING ROLE OF THE BOARD

In my day job as a fundraising consultant, I have spent many years trying to convince both board and staff people that fundraising is an essential part of a board member’s responsibilities. Over time, however, I’ve become increasingly uneasy as an organization’s emphasis on fundraising leads board members to feel sidelined when it comes to the political and program issues that brought them to want to serve the organization in the first place.

I’ve been on boards where the executive director has made clear that fundraising is really the only thing the staff wants board members to work on, and that a board role in program, governance, and strategic thinking and planning is considered neither essential nor even particularly desired. This is an unfortunate development that will ultimately not produce a more willing team of board fundraisers. In fact, it has just the opposite effect: Board members are far less likely to be enthusiastic about raising money if they are not involved in the organization’s purposes in a meaningful way.

I once served on the board of an organization in which the staff developed all of the budgeting and fundraising plans and expected the board would quietly nod approval (and appreciation for the staff’s hard work) and then cheerfully proceed to bring in as much money as possible from our networks of friends and other contacts.

I quickly discovered that my questions about the budget and my disagreements with some of the priorities that had been set around fundraising were treated with surprise and some resentment by the executive director. Asking questions was interpreted as challenging the wisdom and experience of the staff, who felt that we had hired them to carry out these kinds of tasks. In “The Elephant in the Board Room,” the authors identified the ability to deal with (and even to expect and encourage) debate and disagreement to be key to a healthy board. Too often, however, board members raising questions feel the staff see them as disloyal and wasting time.

Whatever one thinks about the role of the board in developing financial and fundraising plans, not being invited to give input and raise questions about how major decisions are made can leave board members less motivated to carry out their fundraising tasks. This winds up being a vicious cycle: board members don’t raise the money they could have because they have questions and concerns that
were not addressed; the staff perceive the questions and concerns to be meddling and annoying — even more so when the board members aren’t producing any money!

Like most people, I join boards to contribute my time, expertise and enthusiasm to causes I care deeply about. Part of what motivates me to give my time to the very serious responsibility of serving on a board of directors is the opportunity to be engaged in the political analysis that informs the work of the organization and the discussions about strategies and tactics in our efforts to make change. The connection with like-minded people also committed to making a difference through the work of an organization is part of what inspires me to take the sometimes scary step of asking for support for this work from my friends, family and acquaintances. My belief in — and connection to — the vitally important work of an organization makes me far more likely to want to ask people for money to support the group’s work.

FUNDRAISING AND THE “REAL” WORK

A related problem is one familiar to nonprofits: the tendency of most organizations to consider fundraising as an unfortunate but necessary burden that brings in the resources needed for the staff to carry out the “real” work. When the board’s responsibility to do fundraising is approached in this way, it’s no wonder that board members are often less than thrilled to participate.

But if the organization views fundraising as a part of the work that organizes new constituencies to learn about and care about the cause, that is a mechanism through which people are educated about an issue, and that can create community awareness and visibility for a group, there might be a more enthusiastic response to fundraising activities from board members. When board members ask their friends, family, colleagues and neighbors to become a member, make a contribution, attend a special event, or purchase a raffle ticket, they are recruiting potential new allies and supporters to the cause rather than just seeking financial gifts.

A recent meeting I had with a donor (as a board member) reinforced this idea. Although the purpose of the meeting was to ask him to consider increasing his gift, most of our time together was spent discussing whether we could better mobilize people to take action on the group’s issues by getting more media coverage or by one-on-one recruitment. This was a perfect example of how a fundraising meeting gave me new ideas (and questions) for the kinds of strategies and approaches the group is taking in our work. Every conversation with a donor has the potential for gathering information, informing decisions, and influencing public opinion on issues.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE BOARD

A friend complained to me recently that the actual work of being on a board was totally different from what she had expected. Most of the time, it seemed, the board of the organization she served was focused on personnel matters, by-law revisions, recruitment of new board members, and fundraising. Her enthusiasm about the organization had waned as input or involvement on a programmatic level was discouraged by the executive director and limited to staff reports given at board meetings.

A board I currently serve on seems to be going the same way. When first formed, the number of members wanting to serve on the board outnumbered board slots. The election process was a lively one, with candidates taking seriously their need to convince the membership of their qualifications to serve. People saw being on the board as a way to be engaged in setting political direction for the organization and being closely connected to important work. In the most recent election, however, there were not enough candidates to fill all of the board positions. It seems that what started as a board that was highly engaged in political discussion and strategizing is now more often than not bogged down in administrative details, financial challenges, and personnel issues — with less enthusiasm for board service as a result.

QUESTIONS

These dilemmas raise two questions. The first is, how does a board maintain its engagement in the more vital, programmatic areas of an organization’s work even as its responsibilities grow to encompass such things as personnel issues, insurance policies, and cash flow challenges?

In “The Elephant in the Board Room,” the authors suggest that a process-oriented approach to board structure might have more positive results:

Many boards work for some period of time — the chair is good, the executive director works well with the board, the committees click. Every structure works for a while, and then doesn’t seem to work any longer. Some new structure is needed to kick-start the board into better functioning. What we need is to analyze, document and develop the process by which an organization would choose one structure over another at any given time, and the process by which they would move on to a new structure when the old one no longer works. In this new approach, all structures would be temporary and permeable, more like tents than buildings.
So rather than search for the one perfect structural solution, we might find some more creative ways to deal with these changes and still keep the political vision, membership engagement and strategic thinking at the heart of the leadership we provide as a board.

The second question relates to the changing nature of the staff. The increased professionalization of nonprofit staff has led to greater authority, reflected in such titles as CEO and president that were unheard of in all but very large nonprofits 20 years ago. It has also led to a truncated role for board members, who are relied on less to bring needed expertise and strategic thinking. For organizations with active members (particularly those involved in community organizing and building a strong base of members to generate enough power to make political change), how can organizations overcome a divide created by this increased professionalization of staff in which members are less central to defining the goals and direction of the organization?

This last question deserves more discussion and debate among the different constituents in nonprofit organizations and will be the topic of future articles.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

The solutions to the challenges I’ve described here are not simple, overnight ones. They require changes on the parts of both board and staff. For now, I propose the following suggestions to executive directors and other staff who work closely with board members.

• Recognize that while board members are busy people whose follow-through is not always what one would like, their willingness to do the less exciting work will be greater if they are more engaged in the heart of the work of the organization.

• Encourage debate and discussion on the part of board members and other constituents of your organization. Don’t assume that questions are judgments or criticisms of the staff’s hard work. By taking the time to consider questions and examine different points of view, creative ideas to what may have seemed like intractable problems can emerge.

• Continue to work toward the integration of fundraising and program work. (For more on this topic, see my article, “Creating a Culture of Fundraising in Your Organization,” in the Journal, Vol. 20 #3, May/June 2001).

• Address the growing divide between staff and board that has resulted from increased professionalization of the sector. While the paid staff may in fact be the best informed about an issue or program, think about ways that having a process for including the views, perspectives and differences of others (board, volunteers, donors and the community being served) can actually expand the impact of your work.

Ultimately, the ability of this sector to achieve our goals will partly depend on our ability to avoid relegating each group — board, staff, member, volunteer, donor — into compartments that limit their contribution, input and authority. We will build on the excitement, passion and willingness to jump in and do the work required — even the less thrilling and more tedious work — because we’re sharing that burden even as we each have a voice in the organization.

STEPHANIE ROTH IS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING JOURNAL.