

CASE: A Good Board That Won't Fundraise

Forrest Sinclair said good night to the last of his board members and closed the door of the office. He liked his board members, and the quarterly meeting of the board had gone relatively well. As chief executive, Forrest felt good about the direction the Elizabeth Waters Wildlife Sanctuary (EWWS) was heading. The sanctuary was more involved in educational outreach, had initiated collaborations with other conservation projects in the region, and was investigating opening a small retreat center as a source of earned income. Forrest felt secure in the support of his board as the organization pursued these projects.

At the same time, he was frustrated about the board's level of participation in fundraising. Especially since many of them had a demeanor suggesting they were natural-born fundraisers, as well as connections in the community. In fact, most of them served on other boards, some of which were small natural history museums, environmental organizations, and even foundations.

To the board's credit, some board members had provided Forrest with lists of personal contacts who could be cultivated for donations. However, the sanctuary's development staff members were having a hard time getting through to those on the lists. And Forrest himself had tried to call a few people, casually mentioning the name of the board member who knew the prospect, but the potential donor usually put him off.

A few members also had expressed willingness to participate more actively in fundraising, but said they really didn't have much experience asking for money and didn't know how to proceed. Forrest immediately mailed each board member a copy of a 20-page funding proposal that the development staff had just polished, along with a memo saying that all the information about the sanctuary's programs and strategies was in there and that should be plenty to prepare the board members for funder visits that the development staff would arrange. As Forrest had described it, the fundraising process was simple: Go in, give your spiel, and ask for a donation. Uncomfortably, board members said they'd be glad to help, but did they have to do that?

After that, a few of the newer board members complained that they had not realized when they joined the board that they would be expected to attend funder meetings and ask for money. They said that they had already tapped into their wealthy associates for other organizations and could only be expected to ask for so much.

Forrest was convinced the board had the potential to be a strong fundraising board. The members were, for the most part, engaged and enthusiastic about the sanctuary's mission — and they had connections. What was keeping them from stepping up and following through?