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When the Floor Becomes the Ceiling

Why board Give/Get policies cap what boards raise, and the holistic model that outperforms them

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The most common board fundraising policy is quietly working against you

The Give/Get is the closest thing nonprofit governance has to a universal fundraising policy: each board member gives a set amount, raises it from others, or combines the two. It is adopted with the best intentions, usually to solve a real problem of uneven board participation. And in our experience across hundreds of board engagements, it consistently produces a result its adopters never intended: the number that was meant to be a floor becomes a ceiling.

Members who could give or raise many times the quota anchor to it. Members who cannot reach it disengage, or never join the board at all. The policy converts a relational responsibility into a transactional one, and once the check is written, most members reasonably conclude their fundraising duty is discharged for the year. Meanwhile the activities that actually build a pipeline, introductions, outreach, and presence, belong to no one.

This paper makes the case for keeping what works in the Give/Get, universal participation at a personally meaningful level, and replacing the dollar-denominated quota with the model Hudson Ferris teaches in its board fundraising training: clear directives, activity-based goals, no expectation of solicitation, full staff support, transparent dashboards, and a genuine team relationship between board and staff. Boards that make this shift raise more, retain members longer, and recruit from a far wider pool.

THE DIAGNOSIS

The legacy construct and what it produces

Most boards inherit the same construct. The board functions as an oversight body for the fundraising team. Members are told, usually at recruitment and rarely again, that they have a duty and responsibility for fundraising. The support they receive varies enormously from one organization to the next. Where a Give/Get exists, it is often the only concrete expression of that duty. And many members were recruited under a quiet premise that they would not personally have to fundraise at all.

The results are predictable, and we see them in nearly every board we assess: little goal-directed fundraising activity at the board level; the 80/20 rule in full effect, with a handful of members carrying the load; members who were never set up to succeed; uninvolved members who drag down the morale of the involved ones; and staff frustration at what reads as indifference. The research matches the field experience. BoardSource's Leading with Intent studies find that on average only 22% of board members ever meet a potential donor face to face, and that 27% of board members are disappointed in their own board's efforts, with fundraising the leading complaint.

None of this stems from bad people. It stems from a construct that gives capable, generous volunteers exactly one clear instruction, a number, and no path to contribute beyond it.

THE CEILING PROBLEM

How a floor becomes a ceiling

A Give/Get sets a minimum. Human behavior turns minimums into targets. Four mechanisms do the damage.

- **Anchoring.** State a number and people anchor to it. A member with the capacity and network to generate $100,000 of value reads a $10,000 Give/Get as the definition of a good board member, meets it, and stops. The policy communicates the organization's ambition, and it communicates a low one.
- **Transaction substitutes for relationship.** The quota converts fundraising from a shared, ongoing responsibility into an annual transaction. Once the check clears or the gala table sells, the duty is discharged. Introductions not made and calls not placed are invisible to a policy that only counts dollars.
- **Recruitment narrows.** A dollar quota screens board candidates by wealth rather than by usefulness. Organizations committed to seating community leaders, younger professionals, and people with lived experience of the mission consistently identify minimum Give/Get amounts as a barrier that deprives the board of exactly the perspectives it needs. The people screened out are often the best-networked ambassadors an organization could ask for.
- **Enforcement fails.** Give/Gets are hard to quantify, awkward to enforce, and dangerous to weaponize. Boards rarely remove members over an unmet quota; instead the policy sits half-enforced, breeding

quiet resentment among those who comply and quiet guilt among those who do not. A policy that cannot be enforced teaches the board that its policies are optional.

The deepest cost is opportunity cost. BoardSource finds that when fundraising expectations are clearly articulated during recruitment, 52% of chief executives report active board engagement in fundraising, against 12% when they are not. Clarity works. The problem is that the Give/Get supplies the wrong clarity: it is precise about the one thing that matters least, the minimum, and silent about everything that matters most.

WHAT TO KEEP

Keep the give. Rethink the get.

The argument here is reform, not abolition. Two elements of the traditional policy are worth keeping, and strengthening.

First, universal participation. Every board member should make a personal gift every year, without exception. Institutional funders ask about board giving percentage, and 100% is the only right answer. This is the floor that should exist, and it is binary, so it cannot become a ceiling.

Second, personal significance. The right standard for the gift is not a fixed amount but a personally meaningful one: a gift that places this organization among the member's top philanthropic commitments, whatever their means. This is the standard BoardSource itself recommends, and it preserves both universal participation and an open door for board candidates of every background.

What goes is the dollar-denominated get. In its place, boards need something better than a number: a defined role, real goals, and real support.

THE ALTERNATIVE

A team model built on activity, not quotas

The model Hudson Ferris teaches in its board fundraising training replaces oversight with partnership. Its premise is that the staff and board are one team responsible for securing the resources the organization's growth requires, with different positions on that team. Six elements make it work.

- **Clear direction.** Board members receive a defined role in fundraising, not a vague duty. The primary role is prospect discovery: surfacing the people, companies, and foundations within reach of the board's collective network.
- **No expectation of solicitation.** Members are trained to spot prospects, and staff generate prospecting ideas for them on a regular basis. Asking is the staff's and leadership's job unless a member volunteers for it.
- **Goals based on activities, not dollars.** Each member agrees to specific, reasonable, action-based goals: introductions made, outreach efforts completed, events represented. Goals are vetted and affirmed by

staff and the development committee or Board Chair, so they are ambitious and achievable for that member.

- **Full staff support.** Staff provide all logistical support and follow-up: the research, the materials, the scheduling, the thank-you notes. A board member should never stall because nobody prepared the next step.
- **Transparency.** Staff maintain dashboards tracking every member's progress against goal, visible to the full board. Transparency reinforces group cohesion and makes engagement the norm rather than the exception.
- **Regular engagement and real accountability.** The development chair meets quarterly with the fundraising team to review progress, and members complete a self-evaluation that feeds the nominating committee's renewal decisions. Accountability lives in governance, where it belongs, not in an unenforceable quota.

DIMENSION	LEGACY GIVE/GET MODEL	TEAM MODEL
Board's role	Oversight body for the fundraising team; members told they have a duty to fundraise	Full partner on one team responsible for resourcing the mission
The expectation	A dollar quota: give the amount, get the amount, or some combination	100% participation at a personally meaningful level, plus specific activity goals
Primary activity	Writing a check or selling tables; solicitation implied but rarely trained	Prospect discovery: introductions, outreach, and representation, with no expectation of solicitation
Goal setting	One number, set uniformly, rarely revisited	Specific, reasonable, action-based goals per member, vetted by the development committee and Board Chair
Staff support	Varies widely; members often left to figure it out	Staff generates prospecting ideas regularly and provides all logistics, research, and follow-up
Accountability	Binary compliance; hard to enforce, easy to resent	Transparent dashboards, quarterly reviews with the development chair, and self-evaluation tied to board renewal

IN PRACTICE

What the shift looks like

In our board engagements the pattern repeats. For a national literacy nonprofit, we mapped the prospect pipeline against each board member's own universe, advised the board on selecting priority prospects, and drafted the correspondence and cultivation timelines for them. Members who had never once fundraised began opening doors within weeks, because the request had changed from "raise $10,000" to "introduce us to these three people you already know, and we will handle everything else."

Consider what the same shift looks like for a typical member. Under the old policy, a well-connected attorney wrote her $5,000 check each December and heard nothing about fundraising in between. Under the team model, she agrees to four introductions and attendance at two cultivation events this year. Staff hand her a short list drawn from her own network, draft every email for her review, and debrief her after each meeting. At year end the dashboard shows her four introductions produced two funder meetings and one five-figure gift, several times the value of the old quota, and she never made an ask.

Boards consistently report a second-order effect: morale. When goals are visible, achievable, and supported, the 80/20 distribution compresses. Members who were embarrassed into silence by a quota they could not meet become active contributors of the thing they always had, access and credibility.

THE PATH FORWARD

Making the transition

- **Reset the policy.** Adopt a board giving policy of 100% participation at a personally meaningful level, and announce the retirement of the dollar-denominated get at the same meeting. Pair the two so the change reads as raising expectations, not lowering them.
- **Put goals on paper.** Write each member's activity goals for the coming year in a one-page board agreement: introductions, outreach efforts, event representation. Have the development committee or Board Chair affirm every member's goals.
- **Fund the support.** Commit the staff side of the bargain in writing too: prospecting ideas delivered on a regular schedule, research and materials for every introduction, and all follow-up handled. The model fails without it.
- **Make progress visible.** Stand up the dashboard and the quarterly development chair review before the first quarter ends. What gets tracked and seen gets done.
- **Recruit on the new premise.** Recruit the next class of board members on this model explicitly. Clear expectations at recruitment quadruple the odds of an actively engaged board, and the activity-based frame widens the candidate pool at the same time.

A board's fundraising capacity was never really a function of its members' net worth. It is a function of how clearly the organization defines the role, how well it supports the people in it, and how honestly it measures what they do. Set a floor where a floor belongs, on participation. Everywhere else, take the ceiling off.

ABOUT

About Hudson Ferris

Hudson Ferris is a boutique fundraising consulting firm headquartered in New York City. The firm has partnered with more than 250 nonprofits in the United States and globally on major gifts, campaign strategy, board development, and institutional fundraising. Our board fundraising training brings the model described in this paper to boards through interactive sessions, simulation-based solicitation training for members who choose to make asks, and hands-on support standing up activity goals, dashboards, and board agreements.

To discuss your board's fundraising model, contact Ed Leibman at ed@hudsonferris.com.

SOURCES

1. BoardSource, Leading with Intent: BoardSource Index of Nonprofit Board Practices. Board engagement in fundraising when expectations are set at recruitment (52% vs. 12%); 22% of board members meeting donors face to face; board giving participation trends.

2. BoardSource, "Board Fundraising Policy: Key Elements, Practical Tips, and Sample Policy" and "The Board's Role in Fundraising": recommendation of 100% board giving at a personally significant level.

3. Stanford Social Innovation Review, "Solving the Mystery of Board Engagement and Fundraising": board member disappointment with board performance, led by fundraising.

4. Sector commentary on Give/Get policies as recruitment and diversity barriers, including Sustainability Education 4 Nonprofits, "The Case Against Board Give or Get Policies," and Nonprofit HR, "Accelerating Nonprofit Board Diversity."

5. Hudson Ferris, "The Next Chapter in Nonprofit Board Fundraising" (board fundraising training deck): the legacy construct, resultant issues, and the team model described in this paper.

6. Hudson Ferris client engagements, 2011–2026. Client identities withheld; the practice example describing an individual board member is an illustrative composite.