



5 Steps the Best Boards Are Taking Right Now

True story. Amy Graves picks up the phone and calls one of the many friends of her organization, BCT Brooklyn Children's Theatre in Brooklyn.

Her goal is simple – to check in and see how he and his family are doing.

That's it. Good ol' fashioned connection. Something we are all pretty damned hungry for these days.

They chat – he's doing OK under the circumstances. He asks how she's holding up.

Amy shares her own family update and then lets him know they have decided to engage kids in making movie musicals in lieu of the cancelled live performances. Rehearsals by Zoom are working out surprisingly well and families are excited about the new concept and maintaining an end of year accomplishment.

He thanks her and Amy thanks him. They end the call the way I'm ending every call now – please stay safe and healthy. He says that he knows nonprofits are struggling and he was going to talk to his wife – he wants to help. He asked if Amy would call him the next day.

You can imagine that it was one of the first calls Amy made. :) And this is what she heard.

"I spoke with my wife yesterday and we really want to help. We'd like to donate \$50,000 and we'll be sure to get you the donation quickly."

I'd like to tease out the lessons in this story and show you five ways your board can be helpful to your organization right now. This is what the best boards are doing right now.

Because how you navigate this crisis will also define how you recover.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE MONEY

No, it's actually not about the donation. First and most importantly Amy absolutely did not call to ask for money. And she never did ask.

She called this donor in an effort to reach out to the folks closest to her small nonprofit. So if it's not about the money, then what is it about?

1. Relationships

Relationships are everything in a nonprofit. Cultivating, stewarding, nurturing your relationships with staff, board, volunteers, donors, members of your community. I'll keep saying it until everyone hears it.

There is NOTHING transactional about your work.

There is NOTHING transactional about fundraising.

It's about inviting folks to know more about your work. And once you bring them close, you develop a relationship with them, you tell them what's going on, you ask their advice. And they come closer.

That's how this nonprofit thing works if you'd like your organization to grow.

2. Connection

People are isolated and frightened. With every passing day there is a greater chance that someone you know will be suffering. When you hear they are turning the largest convention center in NYC into a COVID-19 hospital (14 miles from my dining room table), it's terrifying.

In these circumstances, we'd typically gather, come close to each other. Did you know that after 9/11, William Sonoma could not keep roasting pans in stock? I know because my wife ran the Food Network at the time. In early October, she predicted that would happen and I didn't quite get it.

And then there was a major news story about nesting. People were gathering in each others' homes cooking meals and feeling that sense of comfort, of security, of connection.

Not only can we not do that this time, it's actually life threatening. We can't have the thing we crave most in scary times. Connection.

When Amy called that donor just to check in, it was as close to nesting as they could get. A virtual cup of coffee.

3. Meaning

Millions of people are on lockdown. Shelter at home. Whatever we are calling it.

Maybe they can work some but maybe they are not working at all. I told my wife we need to slow down the whole decluttering thing because we're going to run out of closets before we get sprung.

Millions of Americans are focused inward. Literally and figuratively. And absolutely nothing is better for your frame of mind, your emotional health, than helping someone.

Literally. Studies show that people who volunteer are healthier. Volunteering offers you meaning and purpose.

By the way, the same is true of charitable contributions. When my dear friend Julie Anderson told me, "It makes people feel good to give money to causes they care about," I became a very good fundraiser because the money supported our good work at GLAAD for sure, but I also was offering folks the opportunity to feel a sense of purpose.

When Amy told the donor and his wife the "movie musicals" story, it reminded them of how meaningful the work is and ignited in them a sense of purpose they derived from being connected to the organization. This drove their additional gift. Sure it was about need. But at some deeper level, that donor was motivated by his own need for meaning.

Especially now.

THE TWO WORST THINGS YOUR BOARD CAN DO RIGHT NOW

Hibernate

This is the most common reaction and of course it runs counter to our three lessons above, doesn't it?

The assumption here is that people are focused on whether they have sufficient toilet paper or whether their aging parent is OK (the aging parent they can't visit because they are on lockdown themselves).

People ARE focused on those things for sure. But it's also true that they need connection and meaning. And you as staff and board leaders can offer that.

Freeze

Panic can lead you here. As I've been hearing from all corners of the nonprofit sector, lots of folks have no idea what to do. They are frantic that the organization won't be able to help as many people, that the staff members they admire so much might get laid off, and the idea of asking for money creates total paralysis.

If you see yourself as either an ice cube (frozen) or a grizzly bear (hibernating), please read on.

Believe me. The best boards are doing neither of these right now.

FIVE ACTIVE STEPS YOUR BOARD MEMBERS CAN TAKE THIS WEEK

1. Have a Zoom Meeting: How To Keep Our <enter org name here> Family Close

Don't call it a board meeting. Call it a brainstorming session. The group needs to kick around smart, thoughtful, creative strategies to nurture those who hold your organization close – volunteers, fellow board members, donors, and PLEASE don't forget staff.

And I don't mean to be self serving here but send a link to this blog post out when you send the invitation. The invitation should come from both the E.D. and the Board Chair.

Don't talk about money. In fact, don't talk about anything that triggers any sense of "Oh S*ht" or desperation. Just focus on the three lessons above and how you can interact with your "tribe" in the context of those lessons.

2. Pick Up the Phone

Last week the president of my synagogue called us. "Why is Josh Katz calling us?" we asked as we saw his name on Eileen's phone.

We found out soon enough. He wanted to see how we were doing. Seriously that was it. He of course asked us if we had any questions for him about how things were going on at the temple. But we'd been getting emails and had the basic 411.

Every board member should be given 5 names across all categories of stakeholders. With phone numbers. NOT email addresses. We want real connections here.

3. Brag, Not Beg

This one is simple. The staff sends the board members 4 – 5 terrific photos of the work being done. Could be an image of a person answering crisis hotline calls from their bedroom. Or a screenshot of a staff meeting.

Take a look at this one. Badger Prairie Needs Network fighting food insecurity in Verona, Wisconsin. See the person standing in the pouring rain? Directing traffic for curbside food pickup?

Think about all the stories in this single picture. It's a story about need. About doing what it takes. And it has a hero in a slicker.

You have these pictures too. How about a "picture of the week" that each board member can post on social media or send to their friends? If I was on the board of this org, I wouldn't go over the top. Maybe "Suzie is the woman in the slicker directing traffic. One of the heroes at Badger Prairie. We started curbside food pickup at noon yesterday. You can't see the end of the line of cars. Goes on for days. Proud to be a part of this work."

4. Pick One or Two Folks To Worry About \$

In times like this, the entire board wants to talk about money or the lack of it. This can easily drive the full board into ice cube or grizzly bear mode.

But that will not ignite thoughtful or creative conversations. It's not what the best boards do. So let's just select one or two folks and deputize them – let them partner with the Executive Director to think about money. And let's have them help the staff think about a Plans A, B and C. Not just review financials and worry about cash flow.

The board's deputies should be part of a braintrust to develop a few scenarios. And by the way, I bet someone in your community who is at home looking for a bit of purpose would love to help.

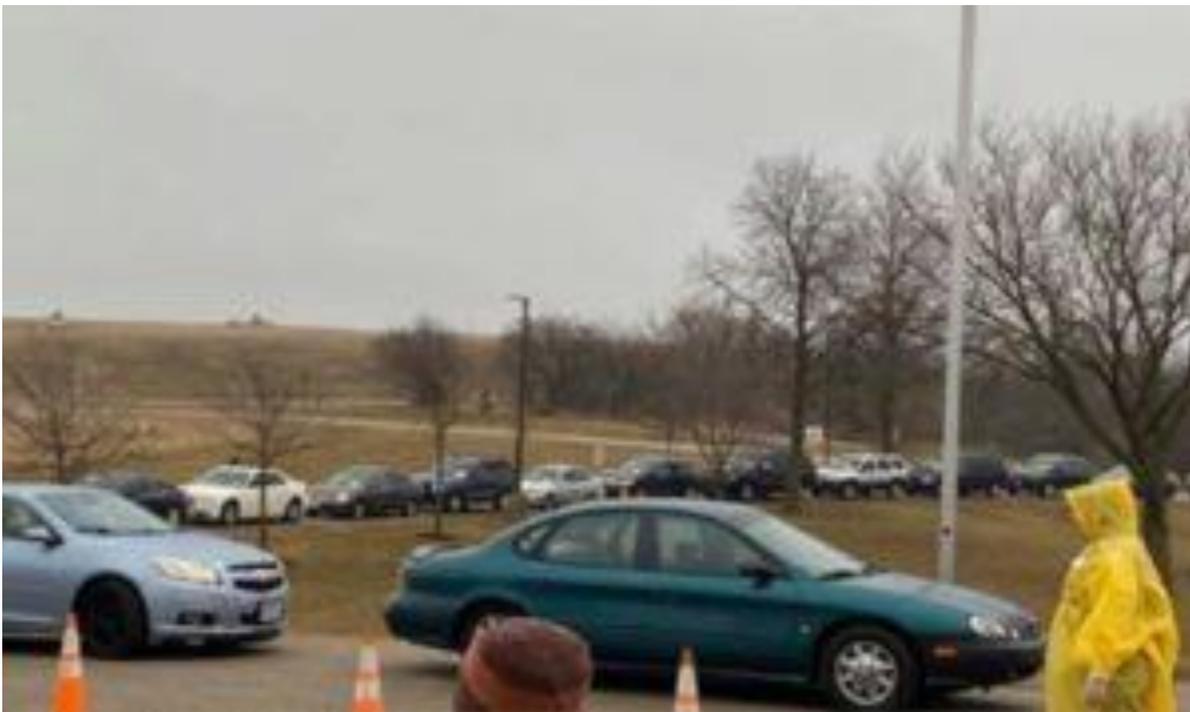
5. A Board / Staff Happy Hour

Do you know how hard it is to work for a nonprofit right now? Princeton Senior Resource Center creates programs to ensure that elders in the Princeton area don't suffer from a feeling of isolation. Imagine you work there. How do you feel knowing how isolated your clients are? It's really hard.

I hear way too much about the tension between board and staff. Let's use this time to create a real sense of team, of shared purpose.

In big organizations, I hear "I don't really know the board members. They are just names of powerful people on a list." Seems like just the right time to get to know one another. (See lessons 1 and 2 above.)

So there are five things. But you have to start with the lessons. If you start every conversation with relationship, connection and meaning, you will set the table for smart and creative conversations.



One last thing. See that picture above?

Does it inspire you to see that woman in the slicker? Me too.

In a world that can feel short on leaders, sometimes you find them standing in the rain directing traffic. And when I think about her, it gives me some hope.

And that is good for what ails us.

NAVIGATING THE CRISIS

Over the coming weeks and months, I'll be focusing on how I can best support nonprofit leaders during this surreal time in our history. From how to engage your board to maintaining your sanity to nurturing your donors to the power of the 'fireside chat,' I'll be offering advice I hope you will find uniquely helpful at this time.

My team and I will monitor comments below especially closely so I encourage you to comment with a topic you'd like me to add to the list. I may not get to all of them but it will allow me to feel the pulse (I know it's racing) of readers and it should result in content that is more resonant, applicable and supportive.

I hope you'll jump onto my email list so I can let you know each time a new post goes live. Please know how much I support you and let's hope we're on the other side of this as soon as possible.

<https://blog.joangarry.com/best-boards/>