

Helping Your Volunteers to Help You: Moving from the General to the Specific:

A corporate support manager told a consultant how frustrated she was with her board: “We’ve asked them to open doors for us, but they won’t do it. I’ve given up on them.” The consultant asked her to describe how her approach to the board. “We explain the value of underwriting,” she said, “and then ask who they know in the business community who might be good underwriting prospects. The only names they supply are those who are already on our air.”

“Make a list of your top five problem prospects, the consultant suggested. “Share that list with the board in an open meeting. Ask them to name decision-makers they know at each company, and then ask if they will ask for an appointment to introduce you.” The approach resulted in appointment at three of the five companies.

What made the difference was that the first approach was general, while the second was specific. Rather than being asked to think about all companies in the community, they were asked to help with five specific problems and told exactly what was needed.

In engaging volunteers, it is important to be as specific as possible. A frequent complaint from the volunteer side of the table is, “I’d love to help. I wish they’d tell me what to do.” The role of the major giving officer is to *facilitate volunteer participation by placing the task within a framework from which they can act.*

- In identifying prospects, asking volunteer leaders to review lists of suspects will produce more information than asking them to suggest names on their own. Asking them to rank prospects in a coding structure will produce better information than feeding them free form questions.
- In preparing for a cultivation meeting, outlining the roles of the volunteer and the professional staff member in advance is more likely to get the volunteer to participate and produces a better prospect meeting than a free-form dialogue.
- In recruiting volunteers, asking them to perform a specific sets of tasks over a specific time frame and giving them a definition of success will often be more successful than asking them to serve on a development committee over an undetermined period of time.