



*Why Organizations Go Off Course – Lesson 8: Don't Pursue Magic Pots of Money*  
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course*. The article details a series of lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),<sup>1</sup> buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in my other series: *Why Organizations Thrive*.

Why Organizations Go off Course Lesson Eight is: Don't Wait for Magic Pots of Money

The title of this lesson is deliberately farcical. After all, no board member waits around for "magic pots of money." Right?

Amazingly, I learned this phrase from the Board Chair of a nonprofit organization who had two fellow board members specifically use that phrase. In their words, the organization needed to hire a consultant to "to help us identify the magical pots of money which are out there for organizations like ours."

The Board Chair was frustrated, as well he should be.

Unfortunately, too many well-meaning board members assume that if you could just find the right "rich person" or the right "foundation" or other "grant maker" that money will flow and the organization's finances will take care of themselves.

By itself, this attitude is a problem. The problem is compounded when too often these board members push back against the board's participation in fundraising.

The stark reality is that fundraising is not rocket science, but it **is** hard work. Identifying potential donors, cultivating relationships, and making asks is 90% about being persistent and only 10% about anything else.

It takes hard work by the staff and board. And it takes board members who're willing to put some real time in between board meetings.

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<sup>1</sup> I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

Board members who think their job is to come to meetings, offer advice, and then go home between meetings are a big problem.

So what can organizations do if they're infected with board members focused on magic pots of money?

There is no quick medicine, but there are four steps that any organization should take.

First, stop recruiting these board members so the problem doesn't get worse. Have very explicit conversations with board members about the role of the board with fundraising. Ask them about their experience and about their expectations for how they will fundraiser for the organization.

Don't assume you'll get them involved and **then** have this conversation. It almost never works that way.

Second, don't skimp on training. Pretty much nobody learns fundraising in school. Even seasoned fundraisers benefit from refresher courses.

As often as once per year, offer your board a 60-90 minute training on Fundraising 101. If you can afford it, bring in an outsider to do the training.

Experienced board members who're good fundraisers can be integrated into the role of helping the trainer so that they don't feel their time is being wasted.

Third, be sure to tell "hard work" stories when celebrating fundraising success. When staff has a big fundraising victory, make sure board members have the full story about all the work that went on over time before the donation was secured.

The story shouldn't leave out all the work that went into talking to all the potential donors who **didn't** give. Remind the board it wasn't magic.

Fourth, focus on recruiting board members who understand their role in fundraising and have the time to do it. In my experience, moving a board member who's unwilling to fundraise to become a fundraiser is far harder than recruiting a new board member.

Of course, if your board is at its maximum size – board recruitment as a tool to change the dynamic will take more time. You will need to build in accountability and other mechanisms to move the poorly performing board members off the board.

But over time, I've seen boards moved away from a culture of hoping for magic and towards one of rolling up their sleeves.

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