

Transcript - Episode 111 - [How to Address the Disengaged Board Member with Cindi Phallen of Create Possibility](#)

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Welcome to the Successful Nonprofit™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. I know that you know this guy. He is always late to meetings, and you know what I love? Regardless of what city he's in, it's always the same excuse: It took me a long time to get here. Either traffic delayed him, or the subway delayed him. Part of why I find that excuse so inexcusable is traffic, for the most part, doesn't really change in most places. It's really bad from about 4:00 in the [afternoon] until about 6:30 in the evening. The subway in some cities is just notoriously late, and you have to plan for it. So, that guy, he's always late to meetings. He says will be on a committee, and you think, "Oh, I hope we get someone else on the committee who will actually do the work with them because it will never get done if he's responsible for it." He returns your calls, but sometimes it takes a week or two and sometimes he actually doesn't return your call. He is... what we might call the *disengaged board member*. Now, is he a lost cause or can he be reengaged? Should this board member be reengaged? Today's guest, Cindi Phallen, president of Create Possibility and author of the book *the Impact Triangle* will share her thoughts on this and other dilemmas that executive directors encounter and the care and feeding of boards. Cindi and I do similar work, and we have a similar occupational history as well, so I know this is going to be a great conversation.

Hey, welcome to the podcast Cindi.

**Cindi Phallen:** Hey, thanks. It's great to be here.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I know from your bio that you have 18 years of experience as an executive director, and you and I share this in common. You noted in your bio that you have made tons of mistakes and learned from them. Guess what? I'm in the exact same boat, and I bet that we could swap horror stories, but let's start by focusing on some of those crucial ingredients for board engagement.

**Cindi Phallen:** Well, I love what you said about the disengaged board member upfront because, yep, I know that guy, have worked with that guy and have learned how to reengage that guy, assuming that he was worth re-engaging, right? You asked the question, "Do we want them to be reengaged?" So, operating on that assumption, what we know for sure is that success starts with mindset. So, in other words, if we want our board members to be engaged, we need to engage them. We've got to put in the work. I found that it's always helpful to work with CEO's or ED's and ask them the question first. How are you thinking about engaging your board members? What does that look like? Are you making some assumptions that might be getting in the way? Do you have some limiting beliefs because of a bad experience you have with the board member before?

Once we kind of dig in to all of that and find out what's going on in terms of how they're looking at it, it really comes down to about four things that are essential when it comes to engaging board members. I start with clear expectations, right? It's from the time you start recruiting

them to your board and talking to them about what you need on your board and why you think they might be valuable to the board doing that match in terms of what you need, what they bring. That's where it starts, and it continues throughout. So, you've lined up expectations for our board members, and continuing from there, it's about breaking it down because you can talk about it in general terms like, "You know, we all know that we want our board members to raise money," or "We need them to be ambassadors in the community."

Whatever it is, breaking it down for them... specificity matters. What does it look like? Then you have to ask, have we really equipped them to be successful? If we want them to be investors in the community, you know, have we helped them figure out how to tell your story? Have we told them who we want them to tell it to and who we want them to make connections with and why? Do they understand all of that? Allow during that process for some feedback. Give them the space to try it to say, "Hey wait, I need some more help with this or that." It's kind of like picturing that you're giving them tools for the toolbox and then breaking those down into very specific actions and interpreting for them what that means, specifically. Then it's equipping them with tools and allowing for feedback loops.

The last thing that I think is super important... I don't know about you, but when I was an exec for 30 days, I felt like I was in this all alone. I would try to just keep moving forward and be persistent, but I finally figured it out that when I line up champions (other people on the board of the staff who get it, who understand that board means we can serve the community better, people who are respected by the other board members maybe have some influence) to work alongside us, Whew! We can be way more successful at engaging the board rather than trying to do it just by ourselves.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I have to share with you that (like you) I feel that setting those expectations is kind of the foundation of having higher performing and engaged board members. One of the things that I'm always sharing with organizations is that no one wants to feel like they aren't succeeding. If you know what the expectations are, most people are going to want to meet those expectations. They've agreed to meet them, and most people are going to want to.

**Cindi Phallen:** I was working with an executive director who was really struggling, and they weren't. Her board members weren't raising money for her and she was like, "Gosh, I don't know if they're lazy or they just don't care anymore. Maybe they don't like me." I said, "Let's take a step back; it looks like you're going down the rabbit hole there. Let me ask you this question. Do you think they get out of bed every day and say, 'Let's see how I can, how I can be a really bad volunteer and not do what people want me to do?' Heck, no they all have good intentions." To your point, you know, they signed up because they do. They do want to do a really great job.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** What are some of those tools and supports that you suggest organizations give to their board members so that they can do a great job? I know we're kind of talking a lot about fundraising, but [you can suggest those] in all areas of board, service committee, service, governance, etc.

**Cindi Phallen:** It all starts with the strategic plan, right? One of the first tools you need to give them and hopefully engage them in the planning process, so they understand what the strategic priorities are. Once you do that, then that drives all your work. That determines what committees you have, how you're structured. Do you need any advisory board? Once they understand and can connect the dots to the big picture, I think you're light years ahead. You probably have seen the board source studies that show that board members that really understand programs and services and how they impact the community are able to tell your story better. Making you're providing them with just some of the most basic information about programs and services and who you're serving and how you're serving them and how their lives have been changed as a result, that's important, too. Even when you get down to the nitty gritty, let's say your [inaudible] can be lined up and maybe you have a PR and marketing committee or something and they need. They need to have a charter that outlines, "Okay, what does this committee supposed to be doing," so that when they come together... Have you ever seen when committees get together and they kind of look around at each other, and they ask, "What are we supposed to be talking about today?" They don't know.

Helping them identify goals, the end game and the overall intention is something that's really helpful. When it comes to the fundraising piece, there's this myth that I think some of us have latched onto that every board member is going to go out there and ask for money and going to be a successful doing it.

Wrong! Not going to happen. It's actually, you know, kind of a cycle of philanthropy that were board members can plug in in different places. Maybe they're helping you identify prospects. Maybe they're helping you cultivate or connect people. I had a volunteer one time say (we were amping up their board effectiveness and trying to optimize their fundraising), "I'm not a fundraiser, not going to do this, let me know if I need to get off the board." We said, "Wait, wait, wait, you're the best storyteller we have. Believe it or not. That's part of philanthropy and fundraising, and so sometimes it's just helping them understand what their specific role is also and showing them if they don't already have it, that cycle of philanthropy so they understand where they can plug in. We also have done things like when organizations are really trying to get the word out about their work, you know, they felt like they were the best kept secret in town.

We created an ambassador cheat sheet for them. That's a great tool to put in their toolbox, and any executive, any board member can do this. It's a great activity to engage board members. Have them get real specific and teach them how to tell your story. It's really simple. There's only three parts. [Tell] your own story as to why as a volunteer you were involved with the organization, what it means to you. Then talk about the programs and services on the organization and then talk about the impact, give a real story about how someone's life's changed. That's the story. Then we get to the call to action. Do you want them to come volunteer? Do you want them to get involved in your programs in some way? Do you want them to invest financially?

So, we said, "Okay, great. We know how to tell the story, but when and to who and where are we supposed to tell this story?" Even an activity like that with your board, just brainstorming lists

that include things like, “Okay, well I could speak publicly to my rotary club? I could invite people to our community event and tell them why it's so important. I could host an info meeting brown bag lunch at my office and tell our story. I could do a number of things, maybe even write for the newsletter.” It's those kinds of specific tools that you want to provide board members so that they can be successful and continue to feel good about their participation.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Based on what you just said, I cannot tell whether you do or do not support a give-get for boards. Do you support a give-get?

**Cindi Phallen:** It's give and get all day every day. 100 percent board giving is not negotiate. In the old days you could get away with it, right? Not anymore.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I wanted to ask whether or not you support a give-get because you'd mentioned a board member said, “Okay, if you want me to do fundraising, I'm out.” When you say you support a give-get, do you support it being a minimum amount? What do you go for?

**Cindi Phallen:** Well, as far as the giving, I'm a proponent of *leave it up to them*. When you recruit them, let them know why you see them as being valuable to your board. It might be a subject matter expertise? It might be their connections in community; it could be any number of things. Also during that conversation, say “Every board member is expected to give a gift that's meaningful to them,” or some language around that. Much of the time they'll say, “Okay, well what does that mean? What's the average board gift?” So, you've got to kind of give them some parameters, but what we've learned to at least I've seen that if you say, “Okay, minimum board give is 500 bucks,” then sometimes that becomes a ceiling and as they get 500 bucks, even if they had the capacity to give 5,000 bucks.

**Cindi Phallen:** You want to get out of your own way. As far as the *get*, I think you can talk about that with your board members. I think you can put a dollar amount on that. However, I do think it will probably be different for certain board members because you want that balance... You want some high profile people probably who know all the mucky mucks in town, and you're going to need some subject matter expertise or you might want people who represent the people who benefit from your programs. What they can raise for you might be different, but *give and get* is really important.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Okay. It sounds like you do support that everyone has to be giving, and everyone has to be fundraising doing something but maybe being more flexible on what that dollar amount is for each board member on your board.

**Cindi Phallen:** Yep.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Got it.

So one of the things that I've often suggested to organizations is that they give their board members a scorecard on a regular basis, probably quarterly, but some folks want to do it more

frequently. It's not just what they've given and what they fundraised, but attendance and at board meetings, committee participation, etc. can all be on a pretty simple one page scorecard. What's your experience with scorecards?

**Cindi Phallen:** I think that's a great idea. I'd love scorecards and I'm a big fan of dashboards. Try to keep it simple on communicate the key points. I've seen it - and I don't know if this is how you develop yours - where they take the written expectations of board members and turn that into the scorecard. If there's 10 things or whatnot that you expect from board members, like you just said, attendance, it's, you know, raising money, identifying board members, whatever it happens to be, then yeah, then you can just kind of grade them, rate them if you would, each of those items.

I also, I created a board engagement checklist which is pretty fun to use with boards, too. It's a self-assessment. It's looking at key areas from oversight. Are they paying attention to the financial and paying attention, following their bylaws through, board structure and recruitment process? Are they focused on engagement, evaluation, succession planning? It's a little broader picture, more comprehensive. It's a great way to get board members engaged and focused on the right thing.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I'm pretty sure that checklist is available at your website, so we're going to link to that in our show notes as well. This is probably the perfect time for us to take a short break, Cindi, and when we come back, we're going to talk about how to reengage that board member who really has just walked off the map and is not involved at all.

**Cindi Phallen:** Sounds great.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** You know, whenever I discuss boards, it is inevitable that the issue of conflict comes up. The board that does not experience conflict exists only in fairy tales, and, frankly, I don't believe a board that is always in agreement will be a good thing because that means they're not critically thinking, not growing. They're just kind of doing groupthink. It's valuable to have and hear different opinions, and how those opinions are shared is truly important. My recent guest, Nate Regier, talked about a fresher and more useful understanding of conflict and encouraged us to engage with openness, resourcefulness, and perseverance. It is well worth a listen if you missed this episode, and it is a valuable refresher even if you heard it the first time, so check out [Conflict Can Be Good for Your Organization with Nate Regier](#) on Successful Nonprofits™.

Hey Cindi, welcome back to the podcast. I gotta ask you because we all, as executive directors or board chairs, have experienced that board member who literally reaches the point of disengagement that they have dropped off the map, that board member that (after three- or four-months) people are like, "Is, is Charlie still on the board?" You've had that board member. I've had that board member. How do we reengage that board member?

**Cindin Phallen:** Well, you know, I think that what you said before about first take a step back and really decide, do we want to reengage the board member? Let's assume that this fellow at some point really brought good value to the board, and I think it's also important to remember roles and because board members report to the board president, right? When board members become disengaged, the board needs to own that to some extent. Backing up again and talking about structure, having a governance committee (or some people call it nominating committee or board development committee) I think is the most important committee of the board. One of their responsibilities is to pay attention to engagement. If somebody's starting to go off the radar, how do we want to reengage them? So, ideally before they get completely off the radar, we would have had a conversation, but let's just say it got passed us, and all of a sudden, this person is just not available anymore for whatever reason, hasn't been around.

I would recommend that a volunteer, one of the board members reach out and have a one-on-one and not with the purpose of trying to blame them or shame them, but to really ask, "Hey, we noticed you haven't been around? How can we support you? What's going on?" Have that conversation first. Many times, that person will be so impressed that you reached out to them that they'll talk about whatever it is the issue is maybe they think the meetings are boring, or maybe they had a sickness in the family or whatever it is. From there, once you know what's going on, then you can negotiate how to reengage them, right? What did they bring to the table before and how can you, if they're interested in that, how can you engage them in that particular thing?

If it was a project, maybe they were mentoring other board members. What was it, a particular committee that they were, really involved with? I think something that you said before about respecting everyone's perspectives and so forth. Sometimes, those board members are stepping away because they're disgruntled with something. What do you do then? I think board culture is something that more and more boards are starting to talk about, and I've seen some boards create board culture statements that talk about how we're going to work together. If necessary, perhaps that comes up, you know, and if they say, "Well gosh, I feel like I haven't been listened to," or some other negative perception that they had in terms of their experience. It's important that the board talks about that and welcomes this person back in and says, "Hey, our culture is all about respecting diverse opinions. It's all about teamwork and holding each other accountable," and then see if there's some things there that might come into play that are a good check for all board members.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Definitely. I've also found that the conversation with the board member who has just walked away not heard from in months... it also oftentimes alleviates guilt that they are feeling. Anyone with a conscience when they shirk their responsibility has some guilt in the back of their head. They're like, "Oh, I should really go back to this board, and I'm not." When you have that conversation, essentially, it alleviates that pressure and it allows the person to say, "Yeah, I want to be reengaged," or to say, you know, "I had some conflict and it's not a good fit for me," but then they walk away kind of without feeling guilty and hopefully without feeling bad about the organization.

**Cindi Phallen:** I agree. I think that's an excellent point. It's a way of letting them off the hook a little bit and not feeling badly about it. I think that's really terrific point. I will also say that if they do end up leaving the board, make sure that you do an exit interview. Just ask a few questions about what did you like best? What would you have changed? How do you want to continue to stay involved with our organization? Could you recommend some other people joined the board, too? Even to your point, let's make sure that their exit is a positive one.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Absolutely. Although, I also think that's where those expectations are really important. [Ask:] Do you know other people who might want to join the board who can meet the following expectations? We don't want more people were angry or whatever.

Sometimes, reengaging your board also means cutting the bottom third of really underperforming board members... [inaudible] You laugh because you know it's true.

**Cindi Phallen:** It is true. There's, you know, sometimes attrition is good, and if you can help move things forward in that regard, it's not all bad.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Right? So, how do we help those board members who are far from being term-limited out but are really not productive board members? How do we help them move off the board?

**Cindi Phallen:** Gosh, that's a tricky situation. It's tough because each person is different. However, again, I think as we point to the big picture (here's where we're going, here's what we need, here's the expectations), at the end of the day, if they can't step in or step up the way that you need them to so you can get the results that you want. Sometimes you just have to have those conversations and say, "What's it going to take to get you reengaged?" I think sometimes they start realizing themselves, "Oops, I need to step in or step off."

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Right. Cindi, when you're saying sometimes you need to have those conversations, I also assume you are meaning the governor's chair, the board chair and not the executive director.

**Cindi Phallen:** Thanks for clarifying. Right. Sometimes, I've also seen at work... The executive director has really strong relationships with a lot of board members. If that happens to be case, the executive director could go along, but I would never recommend that the executive director do it alone.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Yup. Makes sense. It's funny. I've always said that the ED's fingerprints should not be on the gun that shoots a board member and gets them off the board. That really has to be another leadership volunteer that does that.

**Cindi Phallen:** I totally agree.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** I've actually seen a number of boards who, you know, they become so passive to end, they're just so afraid to having the conversation, and eventually they go to their chief executive and they're like, "Please can't you do this?" Those boards must find their backbone, and they've got to have that conversation with the board member.

**Cindi Phallen:** Yeah. Unfortunately, as we know, this kind of thing gets addressed when there's an urgent situation, something's really going sideways. The most successful, high performing highly engaged board are focusing on the year round all the time and keeping their foot on the gas pedal. Otherwise you get complacent. You're going to end up with a board where at least a third of them were just kinda hanging around without really bringing value like they may have at one time.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Absolutely. Well, Cindi, I want to make sure that we've got enough time for the Off-the-Map question, and I've got a doozy for you. In case you don't know the Off-the-Map question, it's a question that will help our listeners get to know you just a little bit better, and it really has nothing at all to do with reengaging or engaging board members.

I know that you live in beautiful San Diego. I also happen to know that you are a huge fan of the sports teams in my adopted hometown of Philadelphia.

**Cindi Phallen:** Yes I am!

**Dolph Goldenburg:** The Eagles and the Phillies fans are a very, very, very special breed. So, what's up with you living in San Diego but loving the Philly teams?

**Cindi Phallen:** Oh, thanks for asking. Now I have to warn you, I can talk about this forever, but I'll keep it brief. I have had the privilege of working at several nonprofits across the US, and I lived in Philadelphia for a number of years. I was a season ticket holder for the eagles, and I would be a Phillies game from hockey game with the flyers. As matter of fact, I was in Philly two weeks ago. I went to a Flyers game, so that's the connection. I actually did live in Philly for a number of years before moving out here to the west coast.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Got it. Okay. So, I will share with you I was living in Philly the year that the Phillies won the World Series, but my home was in South Philly, maybe three quarters of a mile north of the stadium. When they won, I really remember thinking, "If my home does not burn down tonight or get a bullet in the roof tonight, my home will stand for however."

**Cindi Phallen:** That's great. Yeah, we go a little crazy when our sports teams do well, that's for sure. We know how to celebrate.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** No one knows how to celebrate like us Philadelphians. I could not agree with you more.

Well Cindi, thank you so much for being on the podcast today and for sharing what you've learned. I know that you've perfected it, but I also know that there's been some pain and trial and error in order for you to perfect it. So, thank you for going through that journey so that you could share it with others.

**Cindi Phallen:** Oh wow. Thanks. Yeah, this was fun. Thanks for having me.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Well, thank you. I want to make sure that all of our listeners know how they can reach out to you so they can find you a [www.possibility-cp.com](http://www.possibility-cp.com). Now, you can access Cindi's Board Engagement Checklist at that website as well. It's a little bit of a longer URL, so we're going to link it directly in our show notes. Cindi's book is available to order via her website and you can just use the "Store" tab in order to buy that. Hey Cindi, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Cindi Phallen:** Thanks so much for having me. This is fun.

**Dolph Goldenburg:** Are you making a list of strategies that you plan to use to reengage your board? That is fantastic. You just keep right on going and making that list because you will be able to find all of Cindi's contact information in our show notes at [www.successfulnonprofits.com](http://www.successfulnonprofits.com). Now, I think as everybody knows, I'm a huge fan of boards working on developing and improving themselves, and so whether you're using Cindi or me or somebody else, make sure that you are finding someone who's really able to help your board move to the next level. If you have some thoughts on today's show, take a minute and tweet them to me [www.twitter.com/@dolphgoldenburg](https://www.twitter.com/@dolphgoldenburg), and while you've got your thumbs on your phone, go ahead and get out your podcast streamer and rate, review and share today's podcast episode. That is our show for the week. I hope you have gained some insight to help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.

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