

The Board Story Exercise

A facilitator's guide

Everything you need to run the exercise at your next board meeting. A companion to the book *Stories That Raise Money* by Chris Davenport.



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01 Run sheet

A minute-by-minute agenda with the exact lines to say.

02 Coaching notes

How to reflect back and pull the real moment to the surface.

03 Participant worksheets

Prompts, reflection, and a one-page story reference to print.

04 Facilitator cheat sheet

The whole exercise on one page to hold while you run it.

How to use this guide

This is a complete facilitator's guide for the Board Story Exercise. Everything you need to run it is in these pages. You don't need slides, software, or storytelling experience. You need about fifteen to twenty minutes on your agenda and a room full of board members.

What's in here

- A run sheet: the full agenda, step by step, with timing and the words to say.
- Coaching notes: how to reflect back what you hear, and how to pull the real moment to the surface when someone gives you the abstract answer.
- Two optional extensions for when the room is engaged and you have more time.
- Three participant worksheets to print and hand out.
- A one-page cheat sheet to hold while you run the exercise.

Before you print

Print the three worksheet pages near the back, one set per board member. Keep the cheat sheet for yourself. The rest of the guide is for your eyes as the facilitator.

Before the meeting

You don't need much. Board members are the most underused storytellers in any organization. They believe in the mission enough to give their time, their money, and their name, but most have never been asked to put that belief into a story. This exercise fixes that in about fifteen to twenty minutes.

What you need

- About fifteen to twenty minutes on the agenda.
- A room where people can turn and pair up.
- Printed worksheets, one set per board member. Pens.
- No prep from board members, and don't send anything in advance. You don't want people arriving with a rehearsed answer.

Timing at a glance

- 30 sec** Frame the exercise
- 5 min** Write, on paper, in silence
- 5–7 min** Share in pairs
- 3–5 min** Share with the room
- 2 min** What to do after

That's the core, about fifteen to twenty minutes. Board members tend to run over, so leave room. Two optional extensions add roughly ten minutes each.

Open with why it matters

Take thirty seconds to tell them why their story matters, not just to them but to the organization. Then say something like this.

SAY THIS

The reason we're doing this is practical. When you can tell your own story about why this organization matters to you, you become one of our most powerful fundraising tools. Not because you're asking for money, but because people trust people, and a real story from someone they know is worth more than any appeal we could mail.

The run sheet

Frame it in thirty seconds, then get out of the way. Don't over-explain, and don't lecture about storytelling. Point them toward the moment and let it come.

FRAME IT

We're going to spend a few minutes on something a little different. I want each of you to find the story of why you got involved with this organization and the specific moment when this cause became personal for you. We're going to write for a few minutes, then share in pairs. That's it.

1 Write 5 MIN

Everyone picks one prompt from their worksheet and writes for five minutes, in silence. Tell them to start right away and not overthink it. If someone writes something general like "I believe in the mission," ask them for the specific moment: when did you first believe that? Where were you? What happened?

2 Share in pairs 5-7 MIN

Everyone pairs up. One person tells their story out loud, about two minutes, without reading from their notes. The partner just listens. When they finish, the partner says what stood out: "What I heard was... The part that stuck with me was..." Then they switch.

3 Share with the room 3-5 MIN

Ask for one or two volunteers to tell their story to the whole group. Don't force it. After they finish, point out the one detail that made it land. That shows everyone what a strong story sounds like.

SAY THIS

What I noticed was when you said _____. That's the moment I understood why you're here.

Coaching the room

You are not rewriting anyone's story. You are helping them hear the strongest part of their own. Two skills do most of the work: reflecting back, and pulling the moment to the surface.

Pull the moment to the surface

When a volunteer tells their story, listen for the moment the language gets specific. That's where the real story starts. When you hear it, stop them.

SAY THIS

Right there. That's the story. Can you tell me more about that moment specifically? Where were you? What did you see?

What you're listening for

- Specificity. "I was standing in the parking lot after the tour and I couldn't get back in my car" beats "I believed in the mission."
- A shift in voice. A slight slowdown, a pause that wasn't there before. Go quiet and let them stay in it.
- The almost. "I almost didn't come that night" is often the heart of the story.
- A person. If someone specific appears, ask what they said, what the storyteller saw.

The reluctant board member

Someone may say they don't have a story, or would rather get back to the agenda. Don't argue and don't oversell it. Just say:

SAY THIS

Just write whatever comes. It doesn't have to be good.

The most reluctant people often have the most powerful stories. They just need a little longer to get past the official answer.

Extensions and what comes after

Two optional extensions

Use these only if the room is engaged and you have time. Each adds about ten minutes.

A • Sharpen the story

Have a volunteer tell it again while you listen for the scene where something changed. Stop them there and ask for more of that moment. Doing this with one person teaches the whole room by watching.

B • The telling

Everyone tells their story again to a new partner, this time with no notes. The second telling is usually tighter and truer. Afterward ask what changed between the first time and the second.

What to do when the story opens a door

This happens later, out in the community, not in this room. A board member tells their story to a prospective donor, the donor responds, and the board member freezes. Prepare them for these three responses before they leave today.

“Tell me more.”

The best response, and reaching for the brochure is exactly wrong. Go back to the story. More detail, more of what happened.

They share their own connection.

Stop talking about your organization and listen. Ask about what they shared and honor it. It's worth more than anything you'd say next.

They signal interest.

Don't pitch. Offer one simple next step, a visit or a coffee or an introduction. "I'd love to have you come see the program in action. Would that interest you?" is enough.

After the meeting

Follow up with the board members whose stories were strongest. Ask if they'll write it down, or let you write it for them. A real involvement story works in major-donor meetings, annual reports, on the website, and in grant applications. You now know where those stories are. Go get them.

Find Your Moment

Pick the one prompt that pulls at you and start writing. Don't think, just write. You have five minutes. The goal is the real story, not the polished one.

- *I remember the exact moment I decided to get involved. I was...*
- *The first time I really understood what this organization does, I was...*
- *There's one person I think about when I think about why I do this. Their name is...*
- *I almost didn't get involved. What made me say yes was...*
- *I didn't expect to care as much as I do. What changed was...*
- *I was sitting in [place] when...*

WRITE HERE

Reflect It Back

When your partner finishes, don't evaluate. Reflect back what landed. Use these openings, then say what was specific and skip the general.

“ *What I heard was...*

“ *The part that stuck with me was...*

“ *The moment I could actually picture was...*

If one detail made the story real for you, name that detail. That's the part worth keeping, and it is often different from what the storyteller thought mattered most.

NOTES

The Involvement Story in One Page

A board involvement story is one moment told well. You don't need your whole history with this cause. You need the moment it became personal, and enough around it that a listener feels what you felt.

1 The Moment

Where were you? What happened? Put the listener in the room with you. One specific moment, not a summary of years.

2 What it did to you

What shifted. What you couldn't stop thinking about afterward. Why this one stuck when other things didn't.

3 Why you're still here

The line from that moment to today. What keeps you on this board.

Keep it under three minutes out loud. The goal is the real story, not the polished one.

AN EXAMPLE · FROM A SOUP KITCHEN BOARD MEMBER

The moment

A friend asked me to join, and I said yes without thinking much about it. My second month, we were short on hands at the Thursday meal, so I served. A woman came through the line with a work badge still clipped to her shirt. When I handed her a tray she said, quietly, "I've never had to do this before," and went to eat facing the wall.

What it did to me

I couldn't stop thinking about that badge. She had a job. She was doing everything right and still ended up in our line.

Why I'm still here

That was four years ago. I stay because I finally understood what we actually protect. People keeping their dignity on the worst week of their year.

Run it from this page

The exercise runs about 15 to 20 minutes. Board members tend to run over their time, so leave room.

THE SEQUENCE · IN ORDER

30 sec

Frame it

"Find the story of why you got involved and the moment this cause became personal. We'll write, then share in pairs. That's it." Don't over-explain.

5 min

1. Write

One prompt, on paper, in silence. If they go abstract: when did you first believe that? Where were you? What happened?

5–7 min

2. Share in pairs

Two minutes each, no notes. Listener reflects back: "What I heard was... The part that stuck with me was..." Then switch.

3–5 min

3. Share with the room

One or two volunteers, never forced. You reflect the exact detail: "When you said _____, that's the moment I understood why you're here."

2 min

4. Prep them to respond

Before they leave, cover the three responses below so a story that opens a door doesn't stall.

COACHING REMINDERS · ANYTIME

Listen for the real moment

Specificity, a shift in voice, an "almost," a specific person. When you hear it: "Right there. Tell me more. Where were you? What did you see?"

If someone's reluctant

"Just write whatever comes. It doesn't have to be good."

When a story opens a door (with a donor, later)

Donor says tell me more: go back to the story. Donor shares something: listen and honor it. Donor signals interest: offer one small next step, no pitch.

After the meeting

Follow up on the strongest stories. Ask them to write it down, or write it for them.