

IMPROVING BOARD EFFECTIVENESS

An effective board can be both beacon and co-captain. Non-profit and for-profit organizations need attention to four aspects of a board: regular strategic planning; a structure aligned with strategic goals; clear roles and responsibilities; intentional norms for meetings and decision-making.

Strategic planning

Strategic planning helps you decide what kind of board suits the organization at this stage. What talents, skills, knowledge and resources does the board need? For one of my clients, sustainable, local funding sources must replace dependence upon a Federal grant. This strategic priority suggests that as board members rotate off the board, it must seek new members who can assist with this transition. Strategic planning also helps the board set policy and assists the leadership in steering toward goals.

A structure aligned with strategic goals

As the mission, direction and shape of the organization change, so must the board. In a regional organization, committees were formed years ago when regional needs and the organization's purpose looked quite different. Periodically ask what kind of board would be most helpful at this time in the organization's life. Is board size reviewed regularly? Do you have policies for member and board chair succession, or, in a for-profit company, discussion of adding talent the board needs now? Have you thought about adding a board of advisors? In addition, are committees organized to be in alignment with the strategic plan?

Clear roles and responsibilities

As I work both with boards and heads of organizations, I find that boards often are ineffective because their role *vis a vis* the leadership and the roles of individual board members are unclear. I've worked with several non-profits in which board members did not understand that they should guide policy and periodically evaluate the performance of the Executive Director, but trying to manage the organization causes problems. A well-chosen board whose members understand their guiding role keeps the organization's leaders accountable by monitoring the progress of strategic goals without hamstringing leaders. Furthermore, clearly articulating the contributions that you expect from individual board members prevents board members from either running the show or doing little but show up for meetings.

Intentional norms for meetings and decision-making

Left alone, organizational practices just happen, like mildew in damp cellars and spring gardens. If boards aren't attentive, bad habits can proliferate--with terrible results. Who hasn't seen a new leader spend precious time doing board house cleaning before she/he can move the organization forward? Boards should periodically evaluate meeting practices: carefully planning agendas and meetings, using minutes to plan and communicate, clarifying decision-making and setting ground rules for effective group work. And be sure to welcome new members in an orientation process that pays attention to setting behavioral and procedural norms.

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What can your board do for you?

Consider this question from an organizational development perspective, not a legal one.

- Be a think tank for gathering and testing ideas
- Strengthen or complement the organization's relationship and credibility with the community, market and/or industry
- Monitor the organization's health and progress and help leaders remain accountable
- Provide other resources such as specific knowledge needed to fulfill the organization's mission
- Provide or be a link with financial resources

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A client writes...

"...thanks for your excellent advice and perspective...Isn't it often the case that a little probing and questioning can make information fall into place for improved action?"

Deputy Director
Regional Community Organization