

Considering the Board as Volunteers

Intellectually, everyone acknowledges that the members of a nonprofit board of directors are volunteers. In fact, by law in most states, nonprofit boards are required to be comprised of volunteers. The theory goes that the best way to assure donors of proper expenditure of funds is to make sure the governing board has no personal vested interest in the finances of the organization. This concept of "trusteeship" is one of the key factors differentiating the nonprofit board from the for-profit corporate board—for whom having a personal stake in the financial health of the company is deemed to be a good influence in their decision-making.

As a day-to-day matter, however, the volunteer nature of a nonprofit board is frequently overlooked. The similarities between board volunteers and front line, direct-service volunteers are overshadowed by the perception of their differences. This may be a strategic error.

The case for treating board members as distinct from other volunteers revolves around one valid and several questionable points. The legitimate uniqueness is that board volunteers have legal power and authority, even above that of top paid staff. Other volunteers generally have much lower status and may even be perceived as "below" employees. Direct-service volunteers are certainly considered as "optional" help, while the rules of nonprofit incorporation require a board of directors (but not employees).

Less valid are the differences predicated on the real or perceived "stature" of board members. Recruited on the basis of their community leadership positions, frequently on corporate salaries much higher than the nonprofit employees they govern, board members can be an imposing lot. In an effort to show proper respect and appreciation for time donated, the nonprofit adopts a kid glove attitude towards the board. Ironically, this sort of reverence is exactly what interferes with applying good volunteer management principles to this group of volunteers.

Effective Volunteer Strategies

What are some of the "good volunteer management principles" that should be applied to board members?

The first is to define the role of board member as clearly and specifically as possible. Written volunteer job descriptions are as meaningful for a board member as for any direct service volunteer. Job descriptions are acknowledged as useful, but rarely go into the type of detail that would be most helpful. For example, in addition to the usual task list, a board member position description should include:

- ◆ The amount of work expected to prepare for board meetings (reading materials, developing reports, etc.)
- ◆ Expected service on subcommittees of the board and how much time this might take each month.
- ◆ Being a resource as an individual—giving the executive director or other staff access to one's time, ideas, or other things that might help the organization.
- ◆ Exactly what is expected in terms of a personal financial donation or in raising money.

Volunteers should neither assume nor be assumed about. While some candidates might be scared away by an honest job description, think about how much more approachable those board members who agree to the terms will be throughout the year.

From a volunteer management perspective, your goal is to have the most active group of board members possible. If someone is named to the board only to honor a large financial contribution, reconsider. Perhaps you would do better to institute an "Angels Circle" of important donors, without the inherent dishonesty of pretending that some of these even want to be part of governance. When you consider that board members accrue legal liability, you might not even be saying thank you to big donors in a positive way.

Other Principles

Orientation and training are as important for board members as for any volun-

teers. Regardless of the expertise or status of a board member in his or her normal role, no one can walk into a new situation without some preparation. It is never insulting to offer board members the opportunity to learn about your organization—and someone who resents such a session may well be an inappropriate recruit.

When designing new board member orientation, why start from scratch? The director of volunteers probably already has a curriculum, handouts, and perhaps audio-visuals used to orient in-house volunteers. Much of this basic material will be adaptable to board members.

While board members are not "supervised" in the usual sense, they will need to work collaboratively with each other and with top staff. This requires setting a tone of harmony and energy. It also helps to remember some of the variables at work because board members are volunteers. For example, members may be reluctant to criticize each other because they are more intent on relationships than on productivity. Everyone needs to be helped to see this is not an either/or situation.

Too often we burn out some board members while tolerating the inactivity of others. The message we inadvertently send to both groups is that neither extreme matters; the people who do more than their share feel unrecognized while those who do little receive no negative feedback. If you want to show your best volunteers that you appreciate their efforts, deal with "dead wood" as firmly as possible.

When board members are asked to work together with line staff and other volunteers, such as on subcommittees, define the relationships. Do board members have more clout or influence by virtue of their governance position? Will the staff member have a vote or not? For that matter, is the employee expected to participate fully in committee discussions, or merely be present to act a resource when requested? Who takes the minutes? Who has them typed and mailed? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but it is precisely such nitty-

gritty issues that can cause unnecessary tension.

Connecting with the Volunteer Program

The agency's director of volunteers can be a real asset in developing the board of directors, beyond helping with new member orientation. The director of volunteers is out in the community and can identify prospective candidates for board positions. This may include active, committed direct-service volunteers who already have first-hand experience of your agency functions. Such direct-service volunteers are also a source of subcommittee members to work with the board.

Board members should be included in any agency volunteer recognition event. It is never out of place to say thank you for donated time. If you feel uncomfortable with "mixing" board volunteers and other types of agency volunteers, analyze why. Perhaps it is time to upgrade the manner in which direct service volunteers are treated and thanked, rather than to perpetuate a strict hierarchy. You are welcome to do something extra to show appreciation for the board, but they absolutely should be invited to join other agency volunteers whenever possible.

Related to this point is the value of keeping some records on the time and activities of board members. This may seem a time-consuming distraction, but it can be extremely valuable in evaluating the effectiveness of the board and the impact of individual members. At volunteer recognition time, such records provide the basis for special expressions of appreciation for particularly noteworthy service.

Always keep in mind that agency work is the top priority for the employees, but for board members—even for those who care a lot—your agency is not the focus of their professional lives. As volunteers, they will give whatever time they can squeeze from their other commitments. To make sure this time is gladly given and well spent, practice good volunteer management.

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