

The Titanic's Cruise Director

The volunteer factor in an effective nonprofit board

Can nonprofit boards be relied upon to do their job? If someone took you to a soundproof room in the dark, and certified the absence of any recording device or outside consequences, what would be your honest reply?

Of course there are extraordinary boards and spectacular individual board members. In fairness, this same problem applies to the performance of the boards of for-profit corporations, many of which provide little oversight and sometimes culpable negligence (think Enron). One factor special to the nonprofit environment is that board members are volunteers, an issue that deserves closer attention than it normally gets.

It is the law in every state that nonprofit board members receive no personal financial gain from their service. It is this very requirement that assures "trusteeship." It's the board assuring third-party donors that funds are expended properly to achieve the organization's mission, as well as a lack of vested interest in whether or not the organization should stay in operation in the face of changing situations.

Of course, there are many varieties of vested interest beyond financial gain. If a volunteer's grandmother founded the organization, that grandchild has a vested interest in continuing it, as would someone who has donated \$1 million and is therefore put on the board.

In the nonprofit boardroom there is a group of people with a wide range of reasons for being there, receiving no remuneration, expected to make visionary decisions for the long-range health of a mission-based organization, and operating under often-conflicting impressions of what a "good" board should be doing. If board members were trying to build a career through this service, they would not tolerate the ambiguities. As volunteers, however, they are content to comply with whatever culture hand hours in workshops on this topic, the recruitment of new board members remains hit or miss. Boards might no longer subscribe openly to the "give, get, or git" standard of boardmanship, but most organizations continue to value money and contacts above most other criteria for selecting candidates. This could be legitimate, but the problem is that—in a desire to have access to those resources—organizations still negotiate away other aspects of solid board participation, including attendance at meetings, serving on committees, and other necessary work.

It is still far from universal to see position descriptions for being a non-officer member of the board. It might be a lack of clarity as to what is really wanted from individual board members or fear that telling the truth about what is wanted will make candidates run for the hills, but too many new volunteers say yes to a board role without knowing some basic information:

- The attendance policy for board, committee, and special meetings.
- Preparation needed to come to a meeting ready to act.
- Work required in-between meetings, to follow up on decisions made.
- How their names will be used as public endorsement of policies.
- What crises are pending at that moment, what crises have been weathered recently, and what challenges lie ahead.
- An honest assessment of the finances of the orga-

nization and prospects for continued funding.

From the beginning, most volunteers are "flattered on board," approached because of how important their connection to the organization will be and without serious discussion of what work (time, effort, resources) they ideally should be prepared to give. In truth, it's a rare volunteer who can start a relationship with an organization at the board level. What is the message about the complexity of governing an organization if a complete stranger, even one with external qualifications, can walk into a boardroom, be inducted, and immediately be asked to vote on decisions about which the person is not informed?

Starting with the "Governance Is Governance" speech by Ken Dayton for the Independent Sector in 1986, and enshrined as gospel through John Carver's books, in the past 20 years nonprofit boards have moved toward a separation of "governance" from "management." What began as a legitimate concern regarding micro-managing and

staff member. It could be "Take Your Board to Work Day."

Attitudes of paid executives

The dirty little secret in this sector is that many executives don't really like their boards. They like board member fundraising and door opening to other resources, but they see all other interest in operations as meddling. Further, as more execs earn degrees in "nonprofit management," they feel—rightly or wrongly—more skilled and better informed than their board members, particularly on matters related to the daily work of the organization. So while execs tolerate oversight, they resent it, too.

Mission-driven organizations should expect professional performance from their paid employees and front line volunteers. But some governing decisions should be made from a broader perspective of the community. A well-selected volunteer board therefore brings important expertise of its own to the table, expertise that should not be discounted because it is not field-specific to the work of the or-

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neglect of long-range planning has taken the pendulum swing toward extremes that are both artificial and dangerous.

A strong board has diverse members from different segments of the community, perhaps a majority of whom are not necessarily familiar with what the organization does, really, on a daily basis. It's a mystery how anyone can govern anything he or she does not understand at the most basic level. How can someone determine the best policies for an agency without conceptualizing accurately the impact of one direction over another? How can someone advocate for support and funding without having seen the work being done? How can an executive director be evaluated on successful performance if no one has seen her or him in action?

There are boards of directors that don't even meet at the agency governed, choosing instead to convene in a corporate space more convenient and with better refreshments. If the boards do meet on site, most rarely see clients or any level of activity, since board meetings are generally held outside of regular business hours. So what exactly do board members picture when they make decisions?

It might be prudent to require every board member to spend a minimum of eight hours a year at the agency during peak service-delivery hours, even if it's simply sitting in the waiting room and observing. Alternatively, there are direct-service volunteer tasks that might be completed or a board member could shadow a paid

organization.

One indication of the change in attitudes about the roles of board and staff is the number of nonprofits in which the paid executive director has assumed the title of president, while the volunteer president of the board becomes the chair. This follows the for-profit model and conveys more authority to the paid staffer. It's more than simple semantics and serves to marginalize the board to a legal necessity. Perhaps most importantly, the title change implies that the paid executive is the key spokesperson for the organization, which might be inappropriate.

For example, it might be more credible for a health foundation's public face to be a board member who is a doctor or someone with the disease in question, than the organization's top administrator. Similarly, professional associations should be represented by members of that profession, not by someone trained in association management.

Of course, if someone rises to the level of chair of the board simply because of longevity with the organization ("sure they're a bump on a log, but it's their turn"), as a dubious reward for a big donation, or to flatter someone with clout in the community, it's no surprise that both board volunteers and the paid executive are reluctant to vest authority or public relations in this leadership volunteer's hands. But if such a dysfunctional officer selection process occurs, fundamental questions

need to be asked as to how serious the board is about its role in the first place.

Assumptions about volunteers

Too many people, and this includes board volunteers themselves, subscribe to one or more of the following attitudes about volunteers, whether in frontline assignments or at the board level:

- You get what you pay for;
- You have to be grateful for whatever time volunteers can give and not ask for more;
- You can't fire a volunteer;
- You can't hold volunteers to the same standards as paid staff, or they'll leave;
- Volunteers are high maintenance, needing all sorts of special attention.

Self-fulfilling prophecy then creates a downward spiral of low expectations leading to low performance. At the same time, in an effort to be "nice" to volunteers (and possibly not to deflect a big financial donation), no one confronts sub-par performance. There may be a great deal of griping in private, but rare is the courageous chairperson, executive, or other board member who is willing to challenge the behavior of another volunteer. Ironically, the consequences of ignoring inadequate boardsmanship are much worse than offending a few members. It translates into poor governance of the organization and taints all leadership volunteers who are trying to do the job right.

The concept of a volunteer nonprofit board is very powerful and clearly has gotten this far in the creation of the voluntary sector. But the sector

might be at a crossroads. It can be either holding board volunteers accountable to the highest standards so that they, in turn, govern the best possible agencies, or admit defeat and seek a different model.

By-laws need to specify consequences for poor performance and a fair process for removing a board member from office, just as they need to provide term limits and a rotation policy. The next step is to enforce the by-laws, which protect the organization as a whole and therefore are more important than alienating one individual who - if recruited properly - should not be surprised at being held accountable.

New board members should be both oriented and trained. Orientation provides the context for the work of the organization (mission, history, services, clientele, etc.) and an overview of the major challenges and priorities facing the board. More and more organizations are improving this part of the welcome to newcomers. But there is still reluctance to offer training, largely on the basis that those skilled enough to join a board would feel insulted by the implication that they need to learn even more. So instead, deferentially, board members are hung out to dry.

Board members recruited for their expertise in for-profit business management, scientific/medical background, academic credentials, or grassroots savvy might not even know what they do not know about nonprofit governance.

Training is actually a perk of volunteering; learning something new is a proven motivator for continuing, loyal service. Among the topics leadership

volunteers might find beneficial and interesting are:

- The legal and fiduciary differences between a for-profit and a not-for-profit corporation (don't assume they know), and among the different 501(c) categories;
- Nonprofit financial accounting practices and reporting;
- The causes of the problems you address or background on the people you serve;
- Environmental scans of the community;
- Public speaking;
- Legislative advocacy.

Leadership volunteers ought to be given the chance to make use of workshops already offered in a community, both to learn the subject matter and to interact with other organization representatives. Setting aside even 30 minutes of each board meeting for skills development can raise the competency of any board. (Parenthetically, nonprofit management courses also ought to be teaching current and incoming executives about how the principles of volunteer management relate to working with a board.)

When organizations demonstrate that education and commitment are both needed and expected of each board member, volunteers will rise to the occasion. And those served by nonprofits will be the ultimate beneficiaries. *NPT*

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