

Getting Your Board on the Right Track

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Kate Dewey has been a consultant to nonprofit associations for 10 years. She finds that her social-work experience parallels her work with organizations because “organizations are like families; they can be dysfunctional or healthy”.

Communication is perhaps the most important factor that will keep you from losing your grip on the board. Although board members will meet only occasionally throughout the year, a strong board will know what it is meeting to discuss and what needs to be done, or said, before arriving for the meeting. It is good to know your board members’ individual strengths, expectations, and availability and the best way to communicate with them. Those who travel frequently and have sporadic access to the Internet may prefer voicemail to e-mail. And, of course, no matter how electronic things get, don’t lose the personal touch. “Pick up the phone and call”, Dewey reminded her audience.

Much responsibility for building and

maintaining a well-functioning board lies within the board itself. It is important for board members to be informed of the different roles that the board will take care of and what is left up to the staff. Above all else, all board members must understand the mission of the organization; when board members are aware of only part of the mission, their decisions are doomed to be unbalanced. The consequence is a half-met mission. It would be a good idea to print the mission statement on top of the agenda or on the back of name tents at meetings so that it is always available during discussions and decision-making.

The best way to plan and organize the goals of the organization and accountabilities is to involve both board and staff. The staff can provide suggestions and input about how the board can be helpful in accomplishing the organizational goals. In turn, the board should set its own goals and milestones and strategies to reach the goals. The board can provide similar input to staff before they set their goals.

Everyone involved needs to be aware of the financial resources available, which will realistically affect what goals are attainable. Financial management also needs to be understood by the board members. It is not a bad idea to expect the board members to provide personal contributions, which is also a way to guarantee participation. When members make valuable con-

tributions, such as time and money, they will take a greater interest in the board’s reputation. It also helps to provide board members with a job description, so that they are aware of responsibilities from the start, and no surprises arise later.

The staff must use the talents that each member brings to the table. However, the staff’s contributions must not obstruct the board’s process throughout the meeting. Following the agenda during the meetings and making sure that all attendees can see each other in the room are two strategies for monitoring and strengthening the meetings. Between meetings, design a calendar of tasks that need to be completed, showing who is responsible. Then assign a nagger to make sure that each task is completed.

Board terms are also key in keeping the board fluid and healthy. New blood needs to be continually infused, lest the board get stale. Make sure that members are limited to two terms with each term lasting 3 years.

Periodically assessing the overall effectiveness of a board is important. It can be done by conducting an online or paper survey filled out by the members that probes issues of effectiveness and efficiency. That helps to ensure active communication and problem-solving between the staff and the board and between the board members. 