

# Boardroom Bearings

Navigating to Board Excellence

September 5, 2014



## Back to school



OK, so it's a cliché to focus on education in September - *mea culpa!* But in my experience working with hundreds of nonprofit organizations and their boards, many overlook board education as an essential responsibility. It's disappointing, because continuous education is a defining characteristic of high-performing boards. No board can afford to believe it is perfect or that it has nothing to learn.

### Food for thought

In an [article](#) titled "Boards Cannot Be Sacred, Staff Cannot Be Saints, and Founders Should Never Be Martyrs," Paul T. Hogan wrote,

"...the nonprofit sector, and specifically the members of boards, and members of staff, and founders and executive directors, must be much more willing to say, 'Wow, I didn't know that.' Or, 'Hmm, that seems to be a better way of doing this.' Or, 'Yes, I am out of my element here, and I have a lot to learn.' Or the almost never heard 'Yes, I started this, and it's time for me to hand it off and move forward.' More willing, that is, to be fallible, vulnerable, and open to learning.

"But because board members, as an example, are volunteering their (undisputedly) valuable time to serve on a board, there is a tremendous hesitancy to require them to devote additional time to learning what they really need to know to make the highest-level decisions in the organization. No one wants to require them to take a course on the legal requirements of board service, or an overview course on nonprofit financial management, or even a two- or three-hour introduction to the organization they're about to govern.

"ALL of these should be required. They are NOT optional, and they are certainly not irrelevant. And if the members of the board are out of their element, how can they bring everything they (undoubtedly) have to bring to the board?

"If all an organization wants from them is money, then they should have the courage to say so and ask for it, rather than try to flatter them with a place on the board and the hope they'll then just write checks continuously. Respect them enough to teach them what they'll need to know to contribute more than that."

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## Tips for promoting board learning



Remember the old saying, "People support what they help to create"? To ensure board buy-in to board education, ask them what they need to know more about and then provide it.

When you ask someone what they need to know, however, the rub always is "How do I know what I need to know when I don't know it in the first place?" A good approach is to use a survey. The Governance Committee, along with the board chair and CEO, can develop a survey that lists a) topics and b) methods. Topics might include fundraising, reading financial statements, planning, legislation or regulations, facts or research related to the organization's programs and services, emerging needs, etc. Methods are varied: presentations by outside speakers or internal experts, videos, field trips, retreats, articles, etc.

## Need ideas for the board education survey?

A new resource titled "Tips for Promoting Board Learning" has been posted on the Centerpoint website - listed alphabetically under "[Articles](#)" on the "Resources" tab.

The March 4, 2014 issue of Boardroom Bearings also has two articles on education topics and methods - see the [newsletter](#) archive on the "Resources" tab.

## Making mission matter: time to evaluate your organization's mission statement



In June, the *Stanford Social Innovation Review* presented a webinar titled "Making Mission Matter." In evaluating over 900 applications for the Henry R. Kravis Prize in Leadership, it was found that "The vast majority of organizations...do not have a clear, focused mission statement. Organizations are often stretched far too thin into many disparate program areas."

The webinar also cited a study of mission statements conducted by the Stanford Graduate School of Business which found mission statement lacking "rudimentary clarity" and encompassing "too many activities to execute with excellence." Further, "Very few stakeholders know/understand the mission of their organization or feel passion/commitment toward it."

The webinar identified seven key characteristics of nonprofit mission statements:

1. They are focused
2. They solve unmet public needs
3. They leverage unique skills
4. They guide trade-offs
5. They inspire and are inspired by stakeholders
6. They anticipate change
7. They stick in memory.

Slides from the "Making Mission Matter" webinar are posted [here](#).

## Coming up: interview with Mike Trench, Executive Director, Community Foundation of Will County

If you could share a cup of coffee with Mike Trench, what questions would you want to ask? Katheryn Wiedman, creator of this newsletter, will be interviewing Mike this fall; send your questions to [kdw@centerpointinstitute.com](mailto:kdw@centerpointinstitute.com).

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### Question of the month

**Q: What is the board's responsibility to improve itself?**

**A:** Self-improvement is one of the ten core responsibilities of nonprofit boards - standing alongside "Determine the mission, vision, and values," "Ensure necessary resources," and seven others. Building a competent board encompasses recruiting, orienting, and educating board members as well as evaluating the board's work as a whole.

The Nominating Committee of the past - working for only a month or two each year - has been replaced by the Governance Committee or Board Development Committee, which has year-long, overall responsibility for building and sustaining a competent, vibrant, and well-informed board. A "Sample Governance Committee Job Description" is available [here](#).

**Please remember**, you are invited to submit questions simply by emailing them to [kdw@centerpointinstitute.com](mailto:kdw@centerpointinstitute.com). And if you have a troubling board issue and need someone to talk it over with, confidentially, call 815-545-1300 or send email. There is no charge for these conversations.

### Boardroom Bearings...

...is written by Katheryn Wiedman, Ph.D., a BoardSource Certified Governance Trainer at Centerpoint Institute. You may reach her at [kdw@centerpointinstitute.com](mailto:kdw@centerpointinstitute.com) or at 815-545-1300.

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Centerpoint Institute | 2419 Suffolk Lane | Joliet | IL | 60433