Help Me, Help My Board

About the Author

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"Help me, help my board," is a lament among association executives.

The cry arises because few board members have extensive knowledge of governance. Instead they are guided by myths, stay in their comfort zone ("I won't say anything my first year") or they pattern themselves after board behaviors (right or wrong).

These are the pleas I hear as I plan board orientations.

Board members are missing meetings. Directors are trustees of the corporation. When meetings are called they are expected to attend. Many bylaws allow for "excused absences," but those should be rarely used. It takes a team to be a great board. Absent members diminish effectiveness.

My board is reluctant to use the savings. Boards treat financial reserves sacredly, conserving funds for a "rainy day." Every time the board meets and does not use the savings for purposes that advance the mission and serve the members, they are in effect making a decision. Rely on policy to guide the board on the amount and use of savings. Consider allocating a percentage for "research and development." It is prudent to use reserves for technology investments, staffing needs and program development.

Myths influence our board. The most common myths cited include, "we can't lobby or take positions, we can't make money, or all our records are open to the public." The best defense against myths is to cite the facts.

We use a consent agenda but directors won't read in advance. It is said one must "read to lead." If reports are distributed in advance by email, board portal, or through a consent agenda, directors are expected to read them. The chair should promote accountability in preparing for meetings.

They are not engaged. Signs of an engaged director are evidenced by preparation and an understanding of the strategic plan. Disengagement may be caused by too frequent meetings or the lack of a plan. Check recent meeting agendas to see if the discussions are substantive or a series of reports and updates. The minutes should reflect decisions that advance the mission and goals.

Directors have a problem thinking long-term. Directors should focus on the future of the community they represent. It requires thinking beyond their terms of office. Though board terms average 2 or 3 years, one must think 5 to 10 years out. Continually scan the environment and position the organization to best serve and protect its members. Use the annual retreat for an environmental scan or invite a futurist to address the board.

Too few care about government relations. Most mission statements include an element of advocacy. US law affords organizations the "right to petition government." Directors should embrace government relations rather than fearing politics.

Directors overshadow the committee chairs. A link between the board and committees is achieved by directors serving as liaisons. They act as communication conduits and champions for the committees. Too often a director will intimidate the committee chair and act as if he or she runs the meeting. Liaisons should serve as resources but not usurp the role of committee chairs.

Some directors are micromanaging me or staff members. The role of the board is to govern. Because many directors are effective company administrators they slip into the staff's role of management. Directors must understand that the board governs and the staff manages.

Directors think the staff works for them. The board has a direct relationship with the executive director, attorney and accountant. Their relationship with staff should be professional and cordial but they do not have authority to instruct, evaluate or comment on job performance. Staff works under the supervision of the executive director.

The budget drives the board more than the strategic plan. A strategic plan sets the direction for several years. Goals are areas in which the board has committed resources. The strategic plan should primarily guide the board, not the budget. Be sure the plan and budget are in sync.