Board Manual Reveals Priorities and Strategy
Bob Harris, CAE

Association board manuals come in varied shapes and sizes. Volunteer directors rely on them to understand their responsibilities.

Some manuals are nicely bound in a notebook with a table of contents and tabs for quick reference. Others are designed as a virtual document, posted to a shared storage site or accessible on memory stick.

They have creative titles: “Pursuit of Excellence,” “Board Playbook,” and “Your Leadership Manual.”

It is a mistake to call it “Policies and Procedures.” By referencing “procedures” as a board responsibility, directors may think they oversee administration. Their focus should be on higher-level governance, leaving procedures to the staff.

"Creating a Leadership Resource Book that is easy to use is an ideal tool for developing the leadership partnership that maintains a healthy balance between governance and management responsibilities," says Linda S. Jay, RCE of Leadership Concepts in California.

Finding the Priorities in a Manual

It is said, “If you read a budget you can identify the priorities of an organization.” A leadership manual offers similar insights. The contents of the manual reveal an organization’s strategic direction.

Manuals include sections on governing documents, purpose, responsibilities, finances, rosters and an organization chart. Analysis will unveil the priorities. This is especially important as board meetings are cancelled or conducted on-line.

**Mission** – The mission statement should be page one of a manual. It may be supplemented by a vision, values of the board, and a tagline. The mission is the basis for everything. If the mission is absent in the manual, check IRS Form 990, “…describe the organization’s mission and most significant activities.”

**President’s Message** – Presidents start the year with a message about priorities. Consider how the message frames or weaves into a strategic plan.
Bylaws – Broad purpose statements are included in the bylaws. While the statements may be outdated, drafted by the founders up to a century ago, the bylaws reveal organizational intent.

Policies - Policies represent the wisdom of prior boards. A review of the policies will reveal priorities that frame the future, such as investment strategies, scholarship qualifications, ethics compliance, and leadership expectations.

Rosters – A board roster should reflect the diversity of membership. The external job titles of directors offer insight into their experience, interests and competencies. The staffing roster and departments will align with priorities, for instance a Director of Education or Government Affairs.

Structure – An organizational chart depicts relationships with a foundation, components, a for-profit entity and/or a political action committee. Check how the related organizations are structured and their level of performance.

Strategic Plan – Plans span 3 to 5 years, serving as a roadmap for the board. Seldom should the existing or old plan be trashed. It can be built upon. What was decided in the old plan will be the foundation for developing priorities and initiatives in a new plan.

Committees – Committees are appointed to advance priorities. On average an association has a dozen volunteer groups. Review the committee structure and their purpose statements to identify priorities and how the volunteer force is deployed.

Income – Revenue streams should be diverse, without 100% reliance on dues. Priorities will be reflected by income, for example the conference, magazine advertising, and certification. Revenue reveals association strengths and sustainable interests.

Expenses – Priorities are identified in expense line items. An organization allocating 35% to lobbying and legal fees will surely have advocacy among their strategies.

Assets – How the association invests assets is revealing. Owning a showcase office or building a wet lab for training identifies priorities. On the other hand, weak assets will limit setting a big hairy audacious goal (BHAG) for the year. Some associations should focus on creating a reasonable reserve fund.

Membership Application – An application will highlight industry sectors and member interests. Emphasis may be on emerging professionals or career members, for instance. An application asking members to select special interest groups demonstrates engagement and area of focus.
Benefits – The strength of benefits is illuminating. Does a “golden handcuff” exist that draws and retains membership drawing a market share of 70% or higher? Does the association have intellectual property it protects and delivers in the form of a trends’ analysis, certification program or compensation study, for instance?

Publications – Check design and content. Members may not want to receive a newsletter that is out of date before it is delivered. Digital content, APPs and platforms require investment in technology to deliver messages the way members prefer to receive them.

Planning Without the Board

I’ve been asked, “Can you create our strategic plan without the board being present.” My answer is yes, though it is better to include board input. If reasons stop them from attending, some input can be ascertained with a survey.

If the board is averse to planning or cannot convene, use the leadership manual, a survey, and technology to frame a multiyear strategic plan.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.