

Encouraging Visionary Board Leadership

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The rapid pace of change requires that nonprofit boards look and act differently. Many boards have already made the transition. They possess a number of qualities and characteristics that together make up a new profile of board effectiveness.

The New Profile

This new board possesses some of the following characteristics: They are **visionary and future focused**, spending most of their decision-making time looking forward. They possess an **entrepreneurial spirit**, understanding that their organizations operate in a fast changing marketplace seeking products and services to meet emerging customer needs. The new board leaders are **risk takers**, balancing the need to take chances with the traditional stewardship responsibilities of board service. They are **good communicators**, understanding the importance of effective communication at all levels and they organize the board and its committees accordingly. They are **systems thinkers** seeking to understand the root causes and forces that shape the issues and challenges they will face in the boardroom. They look for courses of action that will exert the highest possible leverage as they respond to those issues. In the new board, leaders also look for creative ways to connect their organizations to the world around them, exploring and **imagining new forms of partnership and alliances** that will support their missions and advance in their strategic plans. The new board's leaders also have a **deep appreciation of the strength of diversity**, understanding that diversity helps to assure a higher level of responsiveness to customers and also promotes creativity, innovation and organizational learning.

These characteristics that define the emerging nonprofit board position the board leaders to exert a more visionary leadership style. However there are a number of barriers that get in the way of boards acting in this way.

Barriers to Boards Playing a Visionary Leadership Role

There are a number of factors that prevent boards from exercising the kind of visionary leadership described above. Taken together, these factors provide a checklist for assessing your board and identifying areas to target for improvement. Examining these barriers to visionary board leadership can be the first step in revitalizing an existing board or building a powerful board from scratch. Let's look at some of them now:

Lack of time. In order to play a visionary leadership role, board members need the time to attend meetings, read materials and maintain contact with each other in between meetings. This puts pressure on the board to do everything it can to organize for maximum effectiveness and avoid wasting time on trivial matters.

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Avoidance of risk-taking. In order to be innovative and creative in its decision-making, nonprofit boards must be willing to take chances, to try new things, to take risks. This risk-taking flies in the face of the traditional wisdom about board member stewardship responsibilities. Success in new programmatic ventures is never guaranteed. Boards need to acknowledge this tension point and discuss it with funders, donors and other key supporters. Board leaders must strike a balance between taking chances and maintaining the traditional stewardship role.

Lack of board involvement in strategic planning. More than any other activity, strategic planning offers boards an opportunity to think about changes and trends that will have significant impact and devise strategies to effectively respond to challenges. This opportunity to reflect together on the big questions facing the organization provides new vision and a sense of future direction as well as the energy to move forward. Some boards are not involved in strategic planning at all. Some are involved but only superficially. When this happens, the board loses an important opportunity to hone and exercise its visionary leadership skills.

Lack of knowledge in an increasingly complex world. The world is much more complex today for most organizations. Busy board members frequently lack a deep understanding of critical changes, trends and developments that challenge fundamental assumptions about how it defines its work and what success looks like. We see this shift most dramatically in the areas of health, education and welfare. Often, this lack of knowledge results in a lack of confidence on the part of the board to act decisively and authoritatively.

Micro-management. Recently the city council of a major American city spent almost an entire meeting deciding what color to paint the seats in the stadium currently under construction. Practically all of us have hair-raising stories about boards that spent untold hours discussing trivial subjects while neglecting major agenda items deserving their more careful deliberation. It is critical that the board focuses its attention on items of critical importance to the organization. In order to do this, the board must avoid the temptation to micro-manage or meddle in lesser matters or in areas that are more appropriately handled by the professional staff. The average board, meeting monthly for two hours, has approximately 24 hours of meeting time per year to make all of the major decisions as well as address new critical issues that emerge from time to time. It is simply impossible to do an effective job with in those 24 hours of meeting time, even if only a few hours are wasted on trivia. In addition, a habit of board micro-management can adversely affect the morale of staff and the board's own committees as well.

Holding on to the old ways. In their book, The Accelerating Organization, authors Maira and Scott -- Morgan, state that one principle of survival scientists have observed in natural systems is the continuous shedding of operating rules that cease to be relevant because of changing environmental conditions. Organizations, they surmise, "can hold only a small number of rules and operations at anytime so they must have the ability to shed old rules to make room for the new. Shedding becomes more complicated in systems involving human beings, because their sense of self worth is often attached to many old rules." This all-too-human tendency to hold on to what we know can prevent boards from considering and pursuing new opportunities that conflict with some of the old rules.

Lack of clarity regarding board staff roles and relationships. Sometimes boards assume that it's the job of the executive director to do the visionary thinking. While boards rightly expect executive directors to be visionary and decisive, this doesn't mean that the board sits and waits for direction and inspiration. This lack of clarity can result in boards that don't exercise visionary leadership because they don't think it's their job.

We didn't have to be visionary in a less-competitive past. Time was when clients, members and consumers would just walk in the door on their own -- or so it seemed. Viewing things in this way, boards didn't consider marketplace pressures, or for that matter a competitive marketplace. Today all that has changed. For many boards, however, their leadership style hasn't kept pace with this new awareness.

Some of these barriers will be familiar. All can be overcome. Let's look at five strategies that can help your board adopt a visionary leadership style.

Strategies for Becoming a Visionary Board

Strategy 1 -- Focus on the Ultimate Ends of the Organization

Taking our inspiration from John Carver, author of Boards That Make a Difference, boards must be encouraged to focus on the ultimate ends of the organization and avoid the tendency to micro-manage. The mission, vision, goals, and strategies contained in the strategic plan should be the focus of board reflection and decision-making. Related to this, clarity regarding the roles and relationships of the board and staff must be maintained.

Strategy 2 -- Create a Long-range Plan for the Development of Future Board Leadership

In contrast to the typical short-term recruitment process that focuses narrowly on filling anticipated board vacancies for the current year only, boards need a long-range plan for developing future leadership. Such a plan centers on the following questions: Who will be serving on and leading the board over the next five years? What is our plan to scout board leadership talent for the future? How will we go about fostering and developing future board leadership? Key elements of this approach include:

- Create a standing board development committee to replace the nominations committee. This committee will use the key questions listed above to devise an ongoing process that includes prospecting, recruiting, selecting, orienting and training, and performance assessment of board members.
- Link board development to your strategic plan. Identify the new skills, knowledge, personal contacts, and other attributes future board members will need to possess in order for the board to do its part in advancing the strategic plan. Based on this analysis, develop targeted board recruiting priorities.

- Develop a written board member job description that reflects the future needs and expectations of the board.
- Direct the executive committee to design board meeting agendas that focus attention on the ultimate ends and avoid micro-management.
- Conduct an annual evaluation of the board that focuses in part on how well the board is maintaining a focus on the "ultimate ends" questions.
- Develop a just-in-time board orientation program to speed up the learning curve for new board members so that they can hit the ground running in their first meeting. Again, it is important to link this advance program of orientation and training to the strategic plan.

Strategy 3 -- Develop a Shared Vision of the Organization's Future

The key question for boards is the following: "If we could create the organization of our dreams that will have the impact we most desire, what would that look like?" The board's answer to this question captures the organization's vision. As mentioned earlier, it is critical that the board be involved in the development of a shared vision, the centerpiece of the strategic plan. Once the board has developed a vision statement, look for ways to live the vision in your organization. For example:

- Use the vision as a framework for board decision-making in every meeting -- not just during the annual planning retreat.
- Share your vision with the community. Once you go public, it's hard not to live up to the vision.
- Ask board members what they think is most exciting and inspiring to them about the wording of the organization's vision statement.
- Use the vision as the basis for regular dialog on emerging issues and challenges.
- Seek major media coverage when strategic plan milestones are reached and use this as an opportunity to promote your vision both inside and outside of the organization.

Strategy 4 -- Keep up with the Rapid Pace of Change

Another strategy for nurturing visionary leadership is to help the board keep up with the rapid pace of change. Provide information that helps the board think about these key questions: What external changes and trends will have the greatest impact over the next three to five years on the organization and the people it serves? How can the organization effectively respond to these changes and trends? How are similar organizations responding to these changes and trends?

Let's remember, however, that busy people will have difficulty finding time to read a lot of material so if you intend to share information with the board, especially in printed form, make sure that it is timely, relevant and well-summarized. Here are some suggestions for helping board members stay abreast:

- Schedule time during the regular board meetings for discussion about the impact of key external changes and trends and emerging critical issues.
- Encourage individual board members to read, listen and look for information about emerging trends and bring this information to the attention of the board.
- Periodically send board members short readable articles summarizing relevant future trends.
- Involve the board in ongoing strategic planning as a way to expose them to external trend data.

Strategy 5 -- Stay in Touch with the Changing Needs of Your Customers

The fifth strategy for transforming the leadership style of the board is to provide members with information to enable them to stay in touch with the changing needs of the customer. Key questions include: What do our constituents think of the organization (i.e., What is their perception or image of the organization?) What are the most important future needs and service expectations of the organization on the part of our constituents? For new needs and service expectations of the organization likely to emerge among constituents, what other organizations are positioned to meet these constituent needs? Consider the following activities:

- Create opportunities for board members to "meet the customer". One organization schedules an annual "town hall forum" to provide board members with a face-to-face opportunity to listen to constituents talk about their emerging needs.
- Tap staff experience and knowledge of clients to deepen the board's understanding of emerging customer needs.
- Establish a marketing information system to supply the board with data to support its role.

Summary

To summarize, an effective Board of Directors that can exercise visionary leadership is built upon a number of key strategies. These processes, structures and practices reinforce each other and lay the groundwork for board and organizational effectiveness in this time of rapid, profound change.