

WHAT IS A BOARD OF DIRECTORS

A living, growing, changing body composed of varied individuals, each with his own baggage, experience, skills, agenda, cultural background, dreams.

It has various roles and responsibilities, depending on its stage in life and its staff, if any.

It has structure, tasks, plans, interpersonal interactions, vision, goals, mission.

It always has important legal, fiscal and public responsibilities.

It decides not only what it is going to do—policies, actions, tasks, but also how it is going to operate—assumptions and procedures. Both mission, goals, tasks and method of operation are important and need attention.

The heart of a Board is its people and its overall effectiveness depends on how congruent the organization's mission, goals, tasks and methods of operation are with that of the individuals who make up the Board. Their level of commitment varies with the satisfaction, sense of personal worth, ability to do tasks, to grow, to engage in some decision making in the organization and their belief in the underlying values and mission of the organization.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE BOARDS

1. Atmosphere comfortable, relaxed, informal—people involved and interested.
2. Lot of discussion in which virtually everyone participates—if off track—someone brings it back.
3. Objectives well understood and accepted—formulated so all can agree.
4. Members listen to each other! Each idea given a hearing—people not afraid to think big—to dream a little out loud—mutual respect for others.
5. There is disagreement—conflict, group comfortable with that—no attempt to hide it—no tyranny of minority—but disagreement served as part of exploration—chairman does not dominate.
6. Shared leadership—depending on what is going on—one or another member takes lead in his/her field of competence—members influence chairman.
7. Decision-making shared—reach agreement after thorough discussion of ideas.
8. Criticism frequent, frank, comfortable—people free to express opinions—few hidden agendas—focus on issues, road blocks.
9. When action taken—clear assignments made and accepted.
10. Group self-conscious about its own operations—stop to look at what is interfering with its operation—may be person or matter or procedure.
11. Members have high degree of trust and confidence in each other.

Adapted from Douglas McGregor's Human Side of Enterprise Characteristics of an Effective Work Team

WHAT MOTIVATES, ENERGIZES BOARD MEMBERS TO PARTICIPATE FULLY?

Commitment to Mission, Values

Belief in, connection to own interests, sense of community, of real service

Feeling of Effectiveness

Sense of achievement, impact on goals, that efforts make a difference

Information on how work done is connected to goals of organization

Competence to do task—coaching and support as needed

Sense of personal success, and that of the organization

Personal Learning and Growth

Opportunities to learn new skills, new information about field, research

Challenging assignments

Use of skills, creativity, initiative

Recognition

Being acknowledged as a needed and valued member of group

Respected even in disagreement

Recognition for work, special achievement (personal notes, open recognition in meetings)

Clear Expectations

Expectations of Board members included in recruitment, orientation

Organizational mission, goals, tasks clearly defined, with action plans, time lines

Opportunity for Participation in Decision-Making

Participation in decision-making on goals, tasks, delegated responsibility brings

ownership, increases commitment, energy for implementation

Sense of autonomy is empowering

Meetings That are Focused, Engaging, Respectful of Board Member's Time

Adequate Information

Feedback on personal effectiveness, how efforts make a difference, contribute to whole

For effective consideration of alternatives for decision-making on policy, goals

To connect and reconnect with mission, goals, achievement, successes

General information on trends, environment, best practices, what's going on in field

Relationships

Social opportunities, fun, celebrations of small successes and milestones, ceremonies

*Not all individuals will be energized, empowered by the same actions, processes.

What holds a group of people together is the common vision and commitment to that vision that they share.

SOME WAYS TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

1. Talk about the common vision, dramatize it, and check to see that the mission-vision is authentic, current.
2. Examine climate in which you operate.
Is it open, welcoming of various opinions, surfacing underlying conflicts and dealing with them?
3. Design time to get acquainted.
Know each other's goals, strengths, and values.
4. Establish clear expectations of each member of Board and staff.
Set objectives, indicators and check on them.
5. Board orientation for new members and old members as time and conditions change.
6. Monitor how you are functioning from time to time.
(See characteristics of effective groups)
7. Design and hold Board retreats yearly to examine mission, methods and to check-in with each other.
8. Be sure goals and tasks are clear, and action steps spelled out with time lines, assignments accepted.
9. Evaluate progress for corrective steps in task accomplishment and in how group is functioning.
10. Check your collaborative skills:
Consensus decision-making
Feedback
Communication systems
Conflict surfacing and management
Negotiating for win-win solution
Action planning with the group
11. Plan for recognition of individuals—formal and informal
12. Plan time to have fun together. Celebrate!

Asking Good Questions

One of the most powerful tools a board member has is the skill of asking good questions. Asking questions of elected leaders, staff and representatives of other organizations are central to understanding complex issues and often key to advancing certain causes.

When one knows how and when to ask good questions, they can reassure the timid, disarm the dissident, and create an environment where productive conversations and win/win solutions evolve.

Not only will this skill help with your understanding of the thought of others, it will help enhance the view of your leadership skills among those with whom you work.

The power of asking good questions is that they:

- * Demand an Answer
- * Provoke Thought
- * Uncover Facts
- * Keep you in Control
- * Focus the Conversation