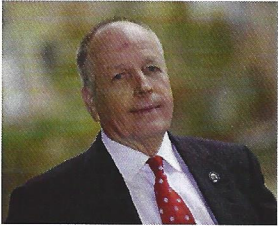




BETTER ENGAGED BOARDS

By Bob Harris, CAE



How do we keep directors engaged? "They lose steam. A few quit coming to meetings. The passion they expressed has waned," are frequent complaints. The problem may run deeper than engagement. Board satisfaction is often correlated to engagement. A

board member who loses interest may be dissatisfied with the organization or their leadership role. With 1.5 million nonprofit boards in the US, many struggle to attract and engage good leaders.

Efficient Meetings – Don't waste the board's time. Does every meeting produce results? Is the agenda a list of reports or an opportunity to discuss substantive issues? If there is no reason to meet – postpone it.

Build on Strengths – No two directors are alike. If one has a passion for fund raising while another prefers marketing, slot them in the right roles. Don't assign tasks in which they have minimal interest. Orientation – Discuss responsibilities and resources at the start of each year. An orientation helps directors focus their interests and commitment of time.

Preparatory Meeting – Get to know directors. Discuss their reasons for volunteering. Be honest about responsibilities; serving on a board might look more glamorous than it is.

Mission Moment – Remind leaders of the mission and vision. Regularly share a "mission moment" --- examples of how the organization's work has benefitted persons and the community.

Strategic Plan – The board is responsible for advancing elements of the plan (mission, vision and goals.) Strategies and tactics are usually assigned to committees and staff. Let a good strategic plan frame nearly every discussion.

Expectations – Organizations develop expectations beyond duties described in the bylaws. Clearly communicate obligations to chair committees, raise funds, support politics or enroll members.

Accountability – Track director attendance, contributions and support on a report card. Identify and praise those who are fully committed. For those missing meetings, the officers (not staff) should discuss absences and alternate roles.

Principles – Values or guiding principles develop in organizations, for example integrity, innovation and transparency. Be sure directors understand the principles. It would be difficult to advance diversity, for instance, if the director is closed-minded.

Time Starved – Organizations compete for volunteer time. Respect contributions by making meetings and tasks easier with support and technology. Break work into "microtasks." Use committees to supplement board and staff work.

Board Buddies – Many directors think, "I won't say anything for the first six months until I learn the ropes." Speed up on-boarding by ask seasoned directors to coach new ones. Require the mentors to "attest" that the new directors are ready for leadership.

Succession – Who will lead the organization when the current chief elected officer steps down? Nothing is more perilous than a board with no succession plan. Identify candidates to move up for at least the next three years.

Term Limits – Avoid the image of a board composed of "good old boys" who have no intent to step aside. Term limits promote rotation on the board and make room for new leaders and ideas.

Diversity – Seek diversity on the board; board composition should reflect the community it represents. Include the talent needed in the organization, for example accountants, bankers and lawyers. Make room for young professionals.

Celebrate – Promote the board's achievements. Include leadership names and photos on brochures and website as appropriate. Lauding accomplishments draws more interest in leadership.

Outside Experts – Don't assign volunteers to tasks that can be done by an expert more efficiently. For example, volunteers editing bylaws could take months while an attorney can do it in hours. Why ask non-tech people to lead a task force when a tech consultant could be hired?

Self-Actualization – Service on the board is a stepping stone to other opportunities. Volunteers may go on to be authors, instructors and elected officials. Encourage directors to progress in their leadership roles. Help them succeed if board service is a step towards self-actualization.

Fun – Volunteer duties needn't be dreary. There will be times when board members can laugh together, become great friends, and enjoy social outings. Promote the fun associated with board service. An engaged and satisfied board results in the desired outcomes.

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