



Group Think at Board Meetings

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Eager-to-contribute board members often voice their ideas with great passion.

Quite often boards, directors and committees (mistakenly) believe that “adding” projects and programs will be their legacy and measure of success. (Many organizations are purposely abandoning outdated programs to better align resources and programs.)

So, when a charismatic director proposes an idea, anticipate that the enthusiasm will build. The motion gains support as more directors ask questions and seemingly reach agreement. The perception is that the proposal is popular and merits a favorable vote.

But wait! Enthusiasm may mask good judgement.

Duty of Care

Directors must uphold the fiduciary principle of Duty of Care. It can be characterized as asking the right questions at meetings. For instance:

Is there genuine backing for the idea ---- or momentary zeal? Will the proposal strain resources? Does it advance the mission? How will progress be measured? Is it a single event idea or perpetual activity?

When a good idea advances without careful and strategic consideration it may be a sign of “group think.”

Group Think, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment.” A group is especially vulnerable to group think when its members are similar in background, when the group is insulated from outside opinions, and when there are no clear rules for decision making.

What starts with, “I have a good idea...” may not fit within the strategic plan and budget. Directors should recognize the difference between enthusiasm versus knowledge based discussions.

Take the Temperature

How can the board determine what is a wise motion or simply a fervent discussion?



The meeting chair is encouraged to ask, *“We know this is an interesting discussion but how many of you are certain that the idea fits inside our strategic plan and mission? Are we willing to divert resources for this new program?”*

Group Think

When enthusiasm outpaces knowledge-driven discussion it becomes dangerous.

This principle is frequently used to describe the space shuttle Challenger disaster. The NASA team was so enthusiastic to launch the shuttle they may have failed to recognize the impact of the weather on the ship’s O-rings.

The Parking Lot

“Is this a discussion important enough to continue or should we ‘park it’ and get back to our agenda,” may be the best question by directors.

Rather than seeking unanimous agreement and courtesy within the board, it may be ok to recognize the director and suggest the proposal be considered in next-year’s program of work --- or placed in the parking lot.

Abilene Paradox

Another example of a group being swayed by the momentum of the conversation is evidenced in the Abilene Paradox. The concept describes a group of people who collectively make a decision when in reality, nobody really agreed. The group seeks harmony and does not question the merit of the discussion.

The paradox comes from an anecdote in which a family in Texas, on a sweltering, dusty afternoon, agrees to drive 53 miles to Abilene in an old car for a meal. Everyone voices that it is a “great idea.” The 106 miles roundtrip are

unbearable. The meal is not much better.

After the exhausted family returns home, the mom voiced that she would have preferred to have stayed home. Others said they wished they had avoided the trek but felt they had to agree in order to satisfy the rest of the group.

Advice

Be prepared for meetings when the enthusiasm of the discussion (group think) or a desire to agree (Abilene paradox) replaces the sound judgment of the board.

Everyone should be empowered to ask: *“Is this a discussion we need to have? Does it advance our mission? Does it fit within our strategic goals?”*

If the answers are “no,” postpone the conversation, put it in the parking lot or drop it in order to get back to the substantive agenda items and to advancing the strategic plan.

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^{i i} Resources include funds, in-kind, volunteer workforce and professional staff.