

A Happy Board is a Productive Board

By Brydon M. DeWitt, President

Many books have been written promising to reveal the secret formula to create and maintain a productive and happy Board. Heck, I've even written one myself that provides some rather basic information on the subject. There are analyses to be done, steps to follow, recommended interaction, and the like. In this issue of the Nonprofit Companion, however, let me suggest some ways to begin any useful process.

Be sure you're ready before you begin: The current status of your Board and its members did not occur overnight. For one or more reasons, bad habits and like procedures were nurtured over time. These must be recognized by Board members and, together, agree on what should be done to put the Board and the nonprofit on a better path.

A good way to start is for the Board chair and the CEO to agree there is a problem and resolve, together, to do something about it. Once that is accomplished, one or more of these steps should be done.

- The Board chair and CEO should schedule a meeting with each member of the Board to discuss, frankly, the member's involvement, ownership of the organization, how the member is being utilized, and any other area that comes up in the conversation. It is important to let the member know that the leadership is ready to address the issues and get his/her commitment to help. This meeting may also result in the resignation of the member; but, that will likely be a positive outcome.
- Next, get agreement of the Board to participate in a workshop specifically to discuss the current status and to plan for its future strengthening. This workshop should be all about the Board leaving other non-relevant matters to be handled later. It is good practice to engage a facilitator with deep experience in working with Boards to help you plan and conduct the workshop.

Foster a positive attitude about Board members within your staff: Too often, staff members look at members of the Board as distant and not truly aware of the real work of the nonprofit. While you certainly do not want staff members to

interact frequently with the Board, it is important to help them understand the essential role the Board plays in the nonprofits ability to function. The Board owns the organization and is responsible for the funding that enables programs to be offered. These funds pay salaries of staff members, as well. Lift up members of your Board as your nonprofit heroes giving staff reports and examples of their positive involvement.

Empower your Board Governance Committee: This standing committee is called by other names (nominating, board affairs, etc.), but is too often the most underappreciated and underutilized committee of the Board. Properly understood, it is this committee that is responsible for the current and future health of the Board. It is this group's responsibility to:

- Review and recommended a job description to the full Board;
- Work with the Board in deciding membership priorities, qualities, and qualifications;
- Manage the cultivation and recruitment of prospective Board members;
- Bring nominations forward to the Board for approval;
- Conduct orientation for new Board members;
- Assign each new member a mentor;
- Conduct in-service training for the Board;
- Conduct the annual review of each Board member who is up for re-consideration.

An active Governance Committee will help identify problems early and help the CEO and the Board chair is reconciling them.

Nurture a strong, supportive relationship between the CEO and the chair of the Board: There is no more important team for a nonprofit than these two individuals. Together, they can provide consistent, coherent leadership both to the Board of Trustees and the members of the organization's staff. Recognizing and understanding this truth of effective nonprofit management will provide a strong foundation for the nonprofit to achieve its goals on all fronts.

Not often mentioned is scheduling some time for the CEO and Board chair to go on a retreat together – just the two of them – to have real chance for in depth conversation about their roles and their need to work together.

Beginning in early October, a new opportunity will be available for distinctive professional, educational, and personal growth for chief executive officers and chairs of Boards. Millwood Institute, itself a nonprofit organization, will give the tools and opportunities for in-depth discussions with other leaders and Institute

faculty on topics relevant to help you lead your nonprofit more effectively. At Millwood, the faculty will be there throughout the Institute.

The most significant aspect of the Institute is likely to be the opportunity for the leadership team to focus on your relationship and the program that you will, together, use in building and strengthening your Board.

Millwood Institute will be purposefully intimate, accepting no more than the CEO's and Board chairs from 12 nonprofits. These leaders must attend together and, we believe, will leave Millwood with expanded knowledge that will immediately benefit their organizations and develop professional and personal relationships that will last for years.

Millwood Institute will be held in the Carter Hall Conference Center in Millwood, VA, 13 miles from Winchester. The Center provides the beauty, seclusion and amenities that will serve to facilitate the communication, interaction, and collaboration among participants and faculty.

We know of no other similar program and invite your consideration of how the Institute could put your organization on a better path toward fulfilling your mission. For information and registration, go to: <http://MillwoodInstitute.org>.