Delicate Balance

By Louis M. Markwith, Vice President

In the Nonprofit world, the CEO is charged with maintaining the proper relationships between the nonprofit staff and the Board of Directors and other volunteers who serve the organization. Establishing appropriate guidelines enables the organization to function well and provide effective service to its clients.
Many years ago, I was talking with a fellow CEO in a partner organization. I will never forget his statement: "No one on my staff will ever know enough about what is going on to be able to *get me*." I was shocked and saddened by this attitude. I questioned in my own mind: what was this person doing that made him believe that someone was out to "get him," or what was he doing that was so underhanded that he feared his staff?

Some years later, I talked with a CEO of a nonprofit who said: "I am afraid to let my board know too much as they may fire me if things go wrong." Not trusting the people who are responsible for safe guarding the organization for the benefit of the community is a dangerous position. If nothing else, the individual is hampered by the fear of failure which can stifle an organization's growth and ultimate success.

CEO is the pivotal point

The CEO is the individual who controls the flow of information throughout the organization. Open communication with the staff means letting them understand the pressures facing the organization to provide appropriate services to clients. Each operational area of the organization must understand how each unit serves the purposes of the **whole**. An open environment encourages the exchange of ideas and builds relationships within the nonprofit. The development unit understanding the difficulties of delivering services to a remote client will help the development officer to communicate better with a potential donor. The service unit understanding the development process will be better able to bring positive stories and examples of success to development.

Owens and Minor, a Richmond, Virginia, corporation, has special titles for the front desk staff. The titles are "Directors of First Impressions." This creative title demonstrates to those individuals that they each have the power to be a positive influence on how everyone feels about Owens and Minor. It empowers the individual. Such empowerment translates into positive action and good feedback into the organization because everyone sees themselves as representatives of the company. The side effect is that people represent the company very well outside of workplace, also.

There needs to be limits on communication as well. Understanding the Mission and the Vision is an important part of every organization because everyone should know "why" of the nonprofit. However, some details should not be shared organization-wide. In the Development process, specific information is researched about individual donors. Donor specific information is only information that can be obtained from public sources such as public registration of deeds and public contribution records. For example, this type of detailed information should only be shared with those people on the staff and on the Board who have a need to know. A staff member in the client services department should not be aware of donor information as the development officer should not know medical information of a client.

The CEO and other supervisory personnel of the nonprofit organization should monitor internal communications in all forms to insure that sensitive information is safe guarded. The Chair of the Board and the CEO should also take steps to insure that members of Board of Trustees (Directors) understand the sensitivity of information that is in the possession of Board members. One should not assume that Board members automatically understand what is sensitive and should not be shared, even with staff of other volunteers outside of the board structure.

Monitoring Board/Staff Relationships

This is a joint responsibility of the CEO and Board Chair. The strongest nonprofit organization operates in a collaborative environment where there is open relationship that permits Board members and staff to work jointly on projects that enhance the programs and operations. The staff supports the actions of individual members and Board members lead public project efforts. This structure can be of benefit by using the talents of both groups.

Some CEO's are leery of open communication which can stifle the effectiveness and morale especially of the staff. I had an experience where the Executive Director controlled all formal communication and never allowed senior staff or others to make presentations. In "open meetings" questions were only taken in writing. In some organizations, staff members are not permitted to interact with Board members or attend "Open Board" meetings. Such actions stifle staff initiative and give Board members a limited view of the skills and talents of the staff supporting the CEO. This limits the overall view of the organization.

Board and staff should interact at formal Board meetings except when personnel issues are discussed. As well, senior staff from various departments should be involved in Board committee meetings where their operational area is discussed. The Board does not expect the CEO to be aware of all of the operational details. One method for creating interaction and mutual respect among Board and staff is to have regular educational sessions at each Board meeting. Board members are volunteers, and their time to devote to education about the organization they serve is limited. The greater the knowledge of the Board members the better they are able to serve and support the nonprofit. The more staff knows about the Board members the better they can support Board actions.

Another way to create report between Board and staff is to establish regular social interaction opportunities. Board and staff need to understand each other outside of the formal board meetings and program events.

Caution

The Board Chair and CEO must monitor the Board/staff relationship. Unhealthy situations can arise when Board members become too involved in the actual operation of the nonprofit or in the lives of individual staff members. Indicators of inappropriate relationships can arise when certain types of question are asked:

From Board Members:

a. How is the relationship between Employee A and employee B?
b. Has employee C asked you about her time off to attend a family function?
c. I am not sure that Employee D's supervisor is evaluating Employee G correctly.
d. I heard that you had to discipline Employee H.
e. I would like to participate in the evaluation of Staff member J.

From Staff Members:

a. Is it true that the Board is considering closing the Petersburg office?
b. Do Board member A and Board Member C argue in Board meetings?
c. I am going over to Board member D's home for drinks tonight.
d. I am really tired of Board Member G; he won't call me back.
e. But, Board member H said I was doing a wonderful job!

While Board members and staff can be friendly, it is important that the relationship remain professional. Board members should be aware if their responsibilities as Stewards, Builders. Policy-Makers, and Ambassadors for the nonprofit. They are not operational parts of the organization and their roles must be separate from the staff roles. It is critical that Board members be oriented as they begin their service about their major responsibilities and the areas that are the purview of the CEO related to the supervision and evaluation of staff.

Staff members must reinforce their positions as supporters of Board members, not peers. Inappropriate relationships can create morale problems among staff as some may feel some staff members have privileges afforded by the Board member. Staff members can assume a Board relationship is personal. It is good for supervisors at all levels interact with staff members and Board members as they are working together. This technique can support the relationships and keep the relationship at the proper level.

The Board Chair should be having conversations with individual Board members about their interaction with the CEO and with supporting staff. The Board Chair should insure that Board members are supported and being asked to carryout functions that utilize their time and talent to the best advantage. The Board Chair should work with the CEO and Board to establish specific goals for the Board to accomplish that will strengthen the organization. These goals should be the individual and collective goals of the Board that support the success of the organization and not goals the staff should achieve.

A Strong Nonprofit

Communication and collaboration are the keys to a strong nonprofit. Board members, CEO's and staff members share equally in maintaining the equilibrium. With attention to roles and responsibilities, great things can be accomplished for the people you serve together.

Frequently we use the NOIASTIBWITB; translation: **N**o **O**rganization **I**s **A**ny **S**tronger **T**han **I**ts **B**oard **W**ants **I**t **T**o **B**e! That is true as well for the CEO and staff. Work hard to support each other, and you will accomplish much.