

Nonprofit Boards Best When Balanced

By Louise Einolf, PhD

Having served as a Board Chair and as an Executive Director, I appreciate the recommendations in the last newsletter for vetting committees that are in search of new Board members. In addition, it helps to have a *Policies and Procedures Manual* that includes the role of a board and clearly explains the obligations of serving on your board. Take time to discuss this role and the terms of agreement to serve with a prospective candidate in order to determine if that person fills a need on your board. Be careful not to deem the potential member as so important to fund raising or raising visibility that signs of not serving well are set aside. You may regret that decision.

A board is best when it is balanced between the “bean counters” and the “bean growers”. Most board members are a bit of both, but lean more toward one role than the other. Bean counters are the people who keep a board grounded in how it manages time, money, and work load. Mismanagement of any of these areas may cause a board to become less efficient and effective. It also makes it more challenging for the Director to manage the operations of the organization if goals do not match resources. Bean growers are the visionaries whose creativity and ability to see the whole picture lead an organization forward in growth and development. The collaboration of these two forces creates the value of the mission to the community and assures the stability of the organization to potential donors.

For this reason, it is better for a board member to come to the table with a specific role as a member and a full commitment to the agenda of the organization. A Board member who has his or her own agenda for carrying out your mission can create “mission creep” in which you are pushed to compromise your mission to accommodate a grant, donor, or access to power. A moving mission frustrates the Executive Director and causes contention on the Board. One way to lose a good Director is to put that person up against a board member who has tacit permission to dominate the agenda or interfere with the staff because no one wants to oppose someone who can raise revenue, has power in the community, or is a primary funder.

No one person on the board should have more value than another in influencing decisions. The loudest and most insistent voice may need to be tactfully quelled for the board to work smoothly. It is the role of the Board Chair not to become that person and not to let others be overbearing. The Director and the Board Chair can deal with an imposing board member by preparing an analysis of each action item that responds to these questions.

- Is it *focused* like a laser on our mission?

- Is it *feasible* with the human and financial capital at hand, and if not, how will these resources be procured?
- Is it *funded* within our budget, and if not, is there access to sufficient funding?

This type of review is an impersonal and businesslike evaluation of projects and programs as they relate to your mission and capacity. They may lead to capacity building as a goal. Major or long term goals may need an action plan that:

- defines a goal,
- lists objectives to meet the goal,
- lists what human and financial resources are required for each objective,
- defines a time frame to complete each objective, and,
- identifies an evaluation process to measure projected outcomes.

The process needs to have a role for everyone on the board or for a specific committee and involve everyone in a final decision. It is the obligation of the Board Chair to ensure that each board member has time to express an opinion and that the Director has full control over the staff as it implements the plan. A positive experience for current board members makes it easier to recruit new members. If a Board capitulates to people who use their membership on a board to dominate it or to polish their standing in the community with their own plan of action, the organization may risk losing good board members and become identified with a voice that is not its own.