

The Board Member as Builder

By Brydon M. DeWitt, President

We consistently use the acronym NOIABTIBWITB when conducting workshops for Board of Trustees. After allowing some puzzled looks and inaccurate attempts to decipher, we give our audience the answer: **No Organization Is Any Better Than Its Board Wants It To Be** – the most powerful and important concept for any Board to accept and adopt. When nonprofits are in distress, the basis of its problems can usually be found within its Board.

Arlo Schilling, former president of North Central College, said it best:

“A strong Board of Trustees does not guarantee a strong organization, but every strong organization has a strong Board of Trustees. Where Boards have been strong, well organized, and committed, the organizations, while they may be undergoing financial pressure, still face the future with expectations of success and continued viability. Where the Board is weak, badly organized, and uncommitted (often non-committed), the organization is usually in deep trouble.”

In the October issue, we talked about the Ambassador role of each Board member. Hand-in-hand with that is the role of Builder. Every Board member should accept this responsibility to the nonprofit, as well as to society, to build and sustain a comprehensive development program to insure the long-term ability of the organization to fulfill its mission.

There are several functions of being a Builder.

- a. **Strategic Planning:** Board members must not be content with the way things are, but make certain that the nonprofit has a vision and a plan for the future. Change is the only constant, and we are either managing the changes that will occur or we are reacting to them. Board members must insist, if necessary, that the organization they hold in trust has a well-thought out strategic plan, updated at three-year intervals, with specific objectives and deadlines for accomplishing them. An exciting nonprofit that will engage people in its support must always be asking “What if?”
- b. **Annual Development Plan:** An annual plan for raising friends and funds should be created and presented to the Board for its review and approval. This should be a comprehensive plan containing both marketing/communications as well as fundraising objectives. The plan should be clear about those objectives where Board members’ participation

will be necessary so that they are clear about the expectations they are approving.

- c. **Fundraising:** Each Board member has a special skill and distinctive knowledge that make him/her an asset to the nonprofit. Not every Board member should be expected to be a solicitor. However, it is important that those members who agree to help in asking for major gifts be given proper training and utilized in this important activity. For those who are not comfortable asking for money, they can join their fellow Board members in identifying major prospects, hosting gatherings, making introductions, and telling the story of the organization at every opportunity.
- d. **Personal Giving:** The most fundamental responsibility of a Trustee is to make regular gifts to the nonprofit he/she owns. Many, including foundations, will not consider grant requests from organizations where there is less than 100% giving by the Board.

In addition to an annual gift for support of the current operations of the organization, each Trustee should consider making an appropriate capital gift – especially during a capital campaign – and providing for the nonprofit through a will bequest or other estate-related means. Personal philanthropy of each Trustee demonstrates true leadership and an understanding that it facilitates raising funds from others.

The late Robert L. Stuhr, a mentor and partner of Gonser Gerber Tinker Stuhr (1958-1985), observed:

“In his business, the Trustee operates for personal profit. In his relation to a nonprofit, he operates for the profit of society. His stake in the latter type of profit is no less real than his stake in the former. There is room for both altruism and self-interest as motivating forces behind effective trusteeship. The important thing is that the motive is truly impelling. A tough enlightened self-interest is better than a flabby altruism.”

And this:

“A Trustee’s job is help pull the wagon, not add to its load.”