

Board Basics 101

An organization that is run by a Board of Directors has some specific roles and responsibilities. The better everyone involved in the organization understands what needs to happen and who is responsible to make things happen, the more effectively the organization can run.

A structured not-for-profit organization has a Constitution and some by-laws that govern the actions and activities of the organization. Anyone serving on the Board or any staff responsible to the Board should be familiar with the information in the Constitution. It identifies the legal requirements for being on the Board, the membership of the organization, what meetings are necessary and how often, etc., and general information about how the organization is run as a legal entity.

How a Board actually operates is often dependent on who the members of the Board are and who the Executive Director or other senior staff person is. Depending on the knowledge level of these people, a Board may be very effective – **or incredibly ineffective!** Below are some basics about how an effective Board is set up.

It begins with the Vision!

In the Constitution there is a description of why the Society is being established, what it is it will do. That is likely the vision that was held by the founders of the organization. Is it still the vision for today? The vision can also be referred to as the purpose statement; what is the purpose of the organization. You have to have a dream to make a dream come true – these are the words in the song, and they are very true. If you don't know why you exist, you don't have the foundation for making the necessary decisions that are required in any organization.

The Board

It is the Board's role to work toward the vision or the purpose of the organization. Ideally, they don't get involved in the day to day operation of the organization – they do the dreaming and the planning and provide the necessary support so that staff can make things happen. The Board is responsible to the membership of the organization.

The Constitution should outline the length of terms and voting practices for Board membership.

Board Members

Board members have responsibility to help the organization achieve its vision. This sometimes requires participants to wear a different hat than when they are acting as a volunteer or serving in some other capacity – a Board member has a responsibility to do what’s best for the overall organization. (In a childcare centre this means a parent serving as a board member, must put the needs of the centre over the needs of themselves or their child.)

Board members may take responsibility to do specific committee or team work on behalf of the organization. This work is typically done on behalf of the Board and recommendations made to the Board.

David Hubbard, former President of Fuller Theological College said that Board members have four roles; governor, sponsor, ambassador and consultant. These are four interesting perspectives to think about when identifying potential board members.

There is no question that the stronger a board is, the more effective the organization will be. A strong board is one that is made up of people who share a passion for the work of the organization, who are prepared to research and learn so that the best possible decisions are made, and who are trustworthy and loyal.

Staff-Board Partnerships

The Board hires the key staff person to run the organization. This person is often called the Executive Director, but regardless of the title, hiring the right person is critical. They must share the vision or purpose of the organization and have all the necessary qualifications to carry out the day to day operation of the organization. The Director takes direction from the Board and carries out their instructions. He or she will also provide the Board with ongoing reports and data regarding the status of the organization and its work.

In an ideal situation it is a partnership and team effort where everyone knows and understands the roles and responsibilities and provides the necessary support for success.

Boards that try to micro-manage the staff or day-to-day operations are usually very ineffective Boards, and staff often are resentful of the interference.

Making it Work

Regular planning and meetings ensure that everyone knows what it is the organization is striving to accomplish and the status of current initiatives. At least once a year, the Board and staff should have a planning session to outline some specific goals or initiatives for the

upcoming year. This will keep the organization focused on its vision and provide an opportunity for the organization to grow and improve.

In a well run organization there are no surprises, the communication is effective, the trust is high, and the workload is shared.