

Nonprofit Boards: Eight Leadership Development Stories

How does your board compare?

Which signs of strength or weakness do you share?

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Conclusion only of this article

Scrutiny of these eight boards reveals common themes. As this study makes clear, there are four keys to board effectiveness:

1. There Must be a Strong

Board President. Whether referred to as president or chair, the leader of the board is pivotal to its functioning. The best board leaders:

- take charge
- collaborate with staff leadership
- have a vision of the possible
- don't try to carry all tasks on their own shoulders.

Those who confuse their role with that of staff or client, or who are co-opted by a charismatic executive director, relinquish the independence of thought and style which are crucial to effective board leadership.

Those who carry the organization on their shoulders create a leadership vacuum when they leave.

2. Board Members Must be

Clear about Their Role. Board members are most effective when they take time to reflect on their role and commit to the organization's mission. In organizations such as Century Child Care, Innovations Theatre, Center Settlement, and Zion Center, the fundraising and director evaluating roles of the board are paramount. In the remaining organizations studied, it was often hard to distinguish the role of a community member from that of a board member. The leadership of the board suffered as a result.

Many board members come with their own agenda and are "one-topic" members.

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3. The Executive Director

Must Act as a Partner. Effective executives walk a tightrope between being strong leaders and allowing space for strong board leadership to be a parallel reality. For the strongest boards in this study, the organization's history helped team the strengths of board and executive. For ailing boards, a strong executive is often a correlate to a weak board. A lack of board vision—uncorrected by the executive—is common in settings such as Holy Rosary High School, with a new and strong principal, and Nazareth Innovations, with the founding executive still in place.³

4. The Board Must Confront

the “Big Questions.” What is common to the boards that struggle the most is a reluctance to grapple with the “big questions.” One of the most crucial of these questions is: Should this enterprise continue to exist, and what would be lost if it does not?

Another big question, never broached by any of the boards during the study, is this: Is the organization sapped or energized by the board of directors? Although an active board has come to be a sort of cultural imperative, the overall utility of boards themselves might be worthy of periodic review.

Footnotes

1 All boards gave permission to share their stories. Names of the organizations, however, are fictionalized for this report. All are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations; four provide social services, while four provide other services. This research was qualitative and hypothesis generating rather than approached with hypotheses pre-formed.

2 How leadership is measured affects the way people perceive their roles as leaders. G. McGonagill (“Board/Staff Partnership: The Key to Effectiveness of State and Local Boards,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, Sept., 1997) suggests that a key part of nonprofit board leadership is a functional relationship with staff.

John Gardner (*The Tasks of Leadership*, Independent Sector, Washington D.C.) cites nine characteristics of leadership: (1) envisioning goals; (2) affirming values; (3) motivating; (4) managing; (5) achieving workable unity; (6) explaining; (7) serving as a symbol; (8) representing the group; and (9) reviewing.