

## THE NEW WORK OF THE BOARD

Effective governance by boards is a rare and unnatural act. Only the most uncommon of boards functions as it should by harnessing the collective efforts of accomplished individuals to advance the institution's mission and long-term welfare. A board's contribution is meant to be strategic, the joint product of talented people brought together to apply their knowledge and experience to the major challenges facing the organization. Instead, boards are often little more than a collection of high-powered people engaged in low level activities.

Highly effective boards:

- concern themselves with crucial, do-or-die issues central to the success of the organization.
- are driven by results that are linked to timetables.
- have clear measures of success.
- Understand internal and external constituencies.

The following describes five important new ways that boards can function more effectively. These *new* ways of doing board work are contrasted with five *old*, more traditional, and less effective ways that many boards function. \*

### (1) Strategic Priorities

**Old Work:** Management defines problems, assesses options and proposes strategies and priorities for the organization. The board listens, learns, approves, and monitors, but rarely asks thorny questions or advances alternative opinions.

**New Work:** The board and management share responsibility for determining the important issues and agenda for the organization. Together they agree upon the vision, direction and strategic priorities for the affiliate.

### (2) Policy Setting

**Old Work:** The board sets policy which management implements. Respective territories of the board and management are sharply defined. Who does what is decided by the organization chart.

**New Work:** The board and management are both involved in setting policy and in implementing it. Lines are blurred. Who does what is decided by the nature of the issue being addressed and who can add value to the deliberations.

### (3) Board Structure

**Old Work:** Committee structure parallels administrative functions. Standing committees match the affiliate's departments, e.g., finance, fund raising, public affairs, education, etc. A premium is placed on permanent structure and established routines.

**New Work:** Board structure mirrors strategic priorities rather than administrative departments. A premium is placed on flexibility, ad hoc arrangements, etc.. The board creates centers of action for members based on changing affiliate strategies and priorities.

### (4) Approach to Meetings

**Old Work:** Board meetings are process driven. Protocols don't vary. Function follows form, i.e., a standard agenda is used for each meeting and most issues are considered and decisions made using the same basic approach. Emphasis is on transmission of information and reports.

**New Work:** Board meetings are goal driven. Protocols vary with circumstances. Form follows function, i.e., meetings are organized in a variety of ways depending upon the issues being considered and the action that those issues require. Emphasis is on board member participation and board collective action.

### (5) Board Membership

**Old Work:** The board is a collection of stars. People are recruited based on their expertise and status. An executive committee or small group within the board has more information and greater influence than do other board members. The CEO cultivates individual relationships and works to bring each individual's talents and connections to bear on affiliate needs.

**New Work:** The board is a constellation. Board members have equal and timely access to information and have significant influence on board actions. In addition to considering the talents, diverse perspectives and connections of potential board members, how they would impact the personality and overall chemistry of the board is also considered. The board cultivates the collective abilities of its members.

\* Adapted from *The New Work of the Nonprofit Board*, R. Chaitt, T. Holland, B. Taylor, Harvard Business Review Sept/Oct 1996.