Better Practices of Effective Boards

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The literature about better practices for non-profit boards is very consistent, but it views those practices and the ways boards do their work from many different angles.

Here is the author's attempt to pull all of those practices and tips into one "top ten" list of characteristics, things to look for, with any effective non-profit board of directors.

1. Cultivation and recruitment of skilled, dedicated, diverse new members goes on year-round. Every new member receives a thorough orientation and a mentor.

2. Expectations of members are high and every member hears about this before they decide to join.

3. Written statements of mission, vision, values, and goals exist and are the focal points of the board's work.

4. There is an active board education program.

5. The board recognizes its own members and members of the staff; it organizes social events for its members that sometimes include staff.

6. The board monitors attendance and activity of its members and follows through on any who are absent or inactive.

7. There are written policies that make clear what the chief executive is supposed to do and what the board is supposed to do. There are job descriptions, written work plans, and evaluations for board officers, board members, committees and task forces, and there are working agreements for the board as a whole. All of these are adhered to in practice.

8. Chairs plan board and committee meetings thoroughly and take steps to ensure they are lively and engaging.

9. The board or a designated group monitors, evaluates *and guides* the chief executive. As part of this responsibility the board monitors agency programs, finances, risk management, and fixed assets.

10. Every member supports the agency as a volunteer, by making a "stretch" gift, by helping to raise funds, and by becoming an effective ambassador for the organization.

Where in the world does an effective board find the time to do all this?

It does (at least) three things:

A) It requires that all board and staff reports be submitted in writing so they can be reviewed ahead of time. It requires that these reports be "headlines," not epic novels. Then it allows the time needed on meeting agendas for the authors of the reports to respond to questions and concerns. Only occasionally, when someone's report surfaces a truly major issue, will this discussion be lengthy – and it should probably then be re-scheduled.

In a great many cases this frees up a *majority* of all the time the board or its committees spend in meetings to carry out the better practices listed above.

B) As stated in #2 above it establishes high expectations for all members. Not unreasonable expectations – but every member is expected to identify how s/he will participate and then to follow through on those commitments.

Members who cannot or will not participate in this way are asked to resign to make room for someone who will – and everyone knows ahead of time that this is the way things work.

C) Board committees do not mirror the staff structure, they are organized to facilitate board members carrying out *board* work, i.e. #1 through #8 above.

E.g., instead of committees entitled and focusing only on "Finance," "Program Development," and "Human Resources," all of which are staff functions, there could be these committees:

"Board Governance," a committee that organizes the board's work on items #1 through #6 above.

"Monitoring and Evaluation," a committee that does most of the board's work of evaluating and guiding the chief executive and monitoring the efficiency and community impact of the agency's services (#9 above);

"Marketing and Fundraising," a committee that organizes the board's work on #10 above;

Occasional board work groups to work on items like #7 above.