

***Boards that Make a Difference:
A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations, 1990***

By John Carver

FROM THE PREFACE (pp. xi-xiii)

This is a book about boards, particularly boards of nonprofit and public organizations. But rather than describe nonprofit and public boards, councils, and commissions as they are, *Boards That Make a Difference* prescribes how they can be.

This is a hopeful book. Boards can be the forward-thinking, value-oriented, leading bodies we claim them to be. In my consulting work with a multitude of boards and chief executives, I have found a great deal of cynicism and resignation. Knowledgeable skeptics think boards can never get beyond being spoon fed by their executives and that, because of their nature, boards must remain fundamentally reactive. With good evidence, many people believe that boards will always stumble from rubber stamping to meddling and back again. They believe the realities of group decision making forever destine boards to be incompetent groups of competent people. My impressions, too, are just as dismal, but I believe the cynicism is justified *only so long as boards continue to be trapped in an inadequate design of their jobs.*

Board members are as conscientious and giving a group as one could ever find. Members of volunteer boards and underpaid public boards interrupt their personal and occupational lives to support something in which they believe. Space is not adequate to give sufficient credit to the works wrought by board members in any given community in one year. Personal drive of board members has accomplished formidable tasks. Perseverance of board members has surmounted seemingly intractable barriers. Patience of board members has outlasted drudgery. Generosity of board members has made the impossible possible.

Board members arrive at the table with dreams. They have vision and values. In many cases, their fervently held beliefs and sincere desire to make a difference impel them to board membership in the first place. Symphony board members want to improve community culture. City councilpersons want to increase the benefits gained for the costs of citizenship. A trade association board wants to augment the opportunities to do business. School board members want to prepare children for life. Boards of hospitals, port authorities, social agencies, chambers of commerce, credit unions and other organizations want to offer their constituents a better life.

Yet, by and large, board members do not spend their time exploring, debating, and defining these dreams. Instead, they expend their energy on a host of demonstrably less important, even trivial, items. Instead of impassioned discussion about the changes to be produced in their world, board members are ordinarily found passively listening to staff reports or dealing with personnel procedures and the budget line for out-of-state travel. Committee agendas are likely to be filled with staff material masquerading as board work. Even when programs and services are on the agenda, discussion is almost always focused on activities rather than intended results. Boards are less incisive, goal directed, and farsighted than their average members.

Much as board members and executives unintentionally conspire to water down the powerful work of genuine governance, they often have a nagging awareness that something is not quite right. Usually, however, their recognition is focused on a specific aspect of board folly. It is rarely the basic design, the system of thought. Concern is often expressed through

complaints over time spent on trivial items, time spent reading reams of documents, meetings that run for hours and accomplish little, committees that are window dressing for what staff wants to do, meddling in administration, staff that are more in control of board agendas than is the board, reactivity rather than proactivity, and executive committee becoming the de facto board, not knowing what is going on, rubber stamping staff recommendations, and lack of an incisive way to evaluate the executive.

Some of the preceding complaints apply to all nonprofit and public boards. In my experience, *most* of what the majority of board do either does not need to be done or is a waste of time when done by the board. Conversely, most of what boards need to do for strategic leadership is not done. This sweeping indictment is not true of all boards all the time, of course, but I contend that it is startlingly true enough of the time to signal a major dysfunction in what we accept as normal.