

Toward Passionate Pragmatism: Building and Sustaining Board Commitment

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Those involved in the leadership of nonprofit organizations are aware of the ways in which the board's role changes as an organization matures. From hands-on involvement during the infancy and fast-growth stages to functioning as a corporate oversight board as the organization approaches and achieves maturity, these changing roles require board members to adapt or boards to change their membership. Throughout all the cycles in an organization's growth, however, one quality is desired in board members: commitment.

Commitment, or sustained passion, is generated when the board is characterized by consistent passionate pragmatism, a balance of qualities which affects decision-making and behavior and ensures that even as an organization matures the passion of the founding is not forgotten.

In the beginning, when the ideas which have inspired an organization's conception are fresh and bold, there is no lack of passion among board members. This passion, which arises out of common vision and shared values, propels and characterizes board behavior. Boards move swiftly to decisions, act boldly on opportunities, and take risks. Seizing the day, board members extend themselves into the community as ambassadors, fund raisers, and advocates: Whether the founder or leader is a staff member or a board member, the communication of the leader's vision and ideals to the board is steady and intense. Communication is clear, expected outcomes are apparent, and everyone participates in successes and disappointments

While demand for services and community interest are high, elements such as structure, record-keeping, policies, and procedures are usually the least time-consuming activities for board members (and often staff). Board members are brought on because of their programmatic expertise and enthusiasm, their connections, and their capacity to perform certain tasks essential to the organization's development. New board members are recruited by those who understand the vision and whose passion for the organization is apparent and compelling.

As organizations grow into adolescence, they begin to focus on systems and structure. Passion can wane. Board members are recruited who were not present at the creation and who may not even know the founder or founding board members. They may not be given the big picture or the vision; they are recruited to meet a specific need of the organization, and are not given an orientation in the larger need the organization is meeting. This irony is often overlooked: as organizations mature, board members begin to be recruited for fund-raising, marketing, or financial expertise rather than program expertise. Thus, at precisely the time the passion is vital if board members are to enroll others as significant funders, the board may find itself short of people who understand and can communicate the mission with vitality and heart.

As organizations mature, it is essential that both passion and pragmatism be present. At the founding or in the early stages of an organization's development, organizations should recruit pragmatists to serve on the board alongside those for whom passion is the driving force. They can learn from each other. By balancing these qualities from the beginning, there will be less chance that at some later time in the organization's growth the board will overcorrect and end up disposing of the passionate in favor of the pragmatic. If both qualities are kept in balance, then even as the board's role changes its commitment can be

sustained. For without passion—based solidly in pragmatism—commitment can waver and the organization's growth may be uneven, chaotic, and marked by setbacks and confusion. Passionate pragmatism can sustain commitment and keep an organization strong and dynamic.

CHECKLIST

Ways to Instill Passionate Pragmatism

- ✓ At every opportunity, link the board with the **product**. One agency which provided child care scholarship funds *so* that people could return to work or school invited recipients to a board meeting to explain how the scholarship affected their lives.
- ✓ Encourage board members to attend regional or national meetings of similar organizations. Talking to others—getting the big picture—is a passion generator.
- ✓ Be sure that **board** members give early and often and that they become "asker **advocates**" for your **organization**. Nothing instills passion like being an investor in an organization.
- ✓ Tell them **the truth—always**. Passion converts to anger and pragmatism to control when board members feel that information is being withheld.
- ✓ Treat all **board** members as major **donors**. Cultivate them. Be sure not to waste their time, insult their intelligence, or conduct meetings that are tedious and dull.
- ✓ Remember that the heart of all **philanthropy is a values exchange**. Board members give their time because they value what *y^ou* value. Be diligent in letting your board members know what a difference they are making in the community.