



NewsLine

May 2009

State Leaders Visit NHPCO for COS Orientation

14

NHPCO's Spiritual Care Guidelines

15

New Study Supports Primary Physician Involvement

16

Hospice People and Places

18

TAPPING YOUR BOARD'S

Full Potential

By Bill Musick, BS, MBA

Would members of your board of directors describe their meetings as dynamic? Productive? Something everyone looks forward to?

Recent studies by the *Nonprofit Quarterly* and the Urban Institute's Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy tell us that good governance is one of the key issues facing nonprofit organizations today. While the latest Daring to Lead study by CompassPoint and the Meyers Foundation concludes that a board's level of engagement is a key determinant in retaining strong executives, it is often lacking. All too often, a focus on the continuous improvement of a board's own processes is overlooked by the chief executive and board even though they may arduously apply similar improvement processes to their clinical work. When this opportunity is overlooked, the full value of a board isn't achieved, and board members and executives can become complacent, frustrated, or burned out.

continued on next page

Also Featured This Month:

10 Ways to Improve Access... While the barriers that limit access to hospice are indeed complex, there are simple, straightforward strategies that can help promote hospice enrollment. Award-winning researcher and hospice physician, David Casarett, provides valuable guidance—see page 9.

FHSSA's Quarterly Report—following page 22.

Rosa Say, author of the book, *Managing with Aloha*, states that organizational culture is made healthier one habit at a time. The Hawaiian concept of Ho'omau, similar to the Japanese concept of Kaizen, which engendered "Continuous Quality Improvement," embodies the idea that every aspect of our lives deserves to be constantly improved. Board engagement is certainly no exception. In fact, because board members meet only periodically and have other demanding responsibilities which claim the vast majority of their waking lives, creating and/or changing board culture is no simple task. One healthier habit at a time is a way to begin, but long-term cultural changes usually require intentional work with buy-in from all of those involved. While this article outlines some changes that can rev up the energy of your board and help it reach its full potential, changing the culture of a board is usually a long-term process that requires dedication and discipline.

Diagnosing a Disengaged Board

There are a number of symptoms that can alert you to a fall-off in energy among your board members. A few of them are listed in the sidebar. If these or any other symptoms of flagging engagement are evident, it makes sense to assess the situation and develop a plan that in the long run will help you develop a board culture that reinforces an active and engaged team.

The symptoms of disengagement can be caused by a number of underlying issues:

- Lack of a vibrant and well-articulated mission and vision;
- Lack of connection between the board's work and the mission and vision;

Symptoms of Disengagement

- Attendance at board meetings is spotty, with difficulty getting a quorum
- One person or group (e.g., executive committee or board chair or executive) does everything
- Committees aren't active or productive
- Board isn't involved in fundraising
- There is difficulty recruiting board members
- There is difficulty finding board members to chair committees or the board
- Chief executive considers the board to be a necessary evil
- Board members attend meetings out of a sense of obligation
- Staff views the board as irrelevant or out of touch
- The community doesn't know anything about the board
- The relationship between the executive and the board is non-supportive
- The executive director and board leadership are rarely challenged by members
- Problematic behavior by board members is overlooked

- Lack of understanding of the board's role and responsibilities;
- Board meetings which have no vital purpose;
- Lack of time or commitment to mission; and
- Low team cohesion/dysfunctional group dynamics.

If we reverse this list of negative causal factors, we end up with the positive elements which support a healthy board. Diagram A (on page 5) depicts "Six Key Aspects of a Healthy Board." Each of the circles represents a potential focus for your change efforts. Which should be your highest priorities? Can you identify steps to take in these areas?

Culture—Culprit or Catalyst?

Every board has its own unique culture. Some are dominated by one individual—a founder, the chair, the executive. Some have set high expectations for a demanding and rewarding job. Others have established a vicious cycle of low expectations. Each culture is unique, and flows from how it sees itself and how it holds its members accountable. If a board isn't assessing how it works and whether it is adding value and clarifying the expectations it has for its members, it probably isn't performing to its full potential.

Culture isn't static; it tends to have either upward or downward momentum. Leave a disengaged board alone and it will usually get worse. Increase its energy and it will often build upon that energy. Unfortunately, we tend to gravitate toward what we know and are comfortable with, so reversing direction can require significant effort if the goal is to sustain energy and engagement for the long haul.

continued on page 4

NewsLine is a publication of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization

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ISSN 1081-5678 • Vol. 20, No. 5

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Successful long-term change and sustained positive momentum can be achieved when the following elements are in place:

- A clearly identified and accepted gap between the current and the desired state;
- Key stakeholders (in this case all board members) who feel they have had a chance to be heard in problem identification and solution;
- Goals that are clear, relevant and realistic; and
- Progress that is monitored, supported and celebrated.

To start, explore changes with key members of the board to test their level of support. Try to begin with at least two to three proponents and one or more champions. If making the case for change is difficult, or if you anticipate that it may be problematic to get the board to agree on a vision for the future and how to get there, consider using a board self-assessment process. It is often an excellent catalyst to identify where the board thinks improvements need to be made and to develop

an action plan to move things forward in the areas that are of highest priority to the board. There are a number of self-assessment tools and consultants who can assist in this process. Using a standardized tool and an impartial outsider who is knowledgeable about board dynamics can overcome many problems that may prevent a board from acknowledging or taking steps to address disengagement. The self-assessment process can educate members about what ought to be and what could be—and comes from the group rather than being imposed upon them. For boards that either are comfortable where they are or do not see other options for how they conduct themselves, a self-assessment can be a real catalyst for positive change.

One Step at a Time

There are a number of steps that organizations can take to increase engagement. Here are suggestions for addressing two of the six key areas noted in Diagram A—meetings and recruiting.





Diagram A: Key Aspects of a Healthy Board

Shake Up Your Meetings

1. Maximize your meeting time by using a “consent calendar,” also known as a “consent agenda,” for items that are not likely to benefit from board discussion (see References on page 8). Minutes, most reports and updates belong on the consent calendar. Using it frees up meeting time for more interesting and productive work.
2. After you have freed up meeting time to address one or two key strategic issues at each meeting, don’t just list a topic and the recommended course of action. Tee up each of those items for the board in advance of the meeting. Present background information and highlight the major issues involved in a decision. Don’t be reluctant to spell out the pros and cons. It will lead to a healthier decision-making process and build trust and commitment for the decisions that the board makes.
3. Allow time and opportunity for individual members to think and to express themselves. For example, the technique, “Silent Starts,” involves setting aside a few minutes at the beginning of each meeting to encourage board members to think through the ramifications of the decisions they will be making during the meeting or to encourage them to think about the source of their passion for your organization’s mission. Executive sessions can be automatically scheduled to allow the board to discuss their own process, to critique their meeting, or to raise concerns to be addressed by task forces or the full board at its next meeting. Executive sessions are

continued on next page



a recommended best practice for keeping issues from festering or being discussed by only a subset of board members.

4. Experiment with new formats for your meetings. Use small group break-outs or a “world café” exercise to consider important issues (see Resources on page 8). For example, assign someone to play the devil’s advocate role at each meeting while assigning others to take pro-and-con sides to a particular issue or to take on the perspectives of various stakeholders as the board considers the impact of a particular decision.
5. Create learning and connecting opportunities. Invite stakeholders and individuals representing external resources to participate in ways that are as interactive as possible. Intersperse stories related to the mission and values with field trips and Q&A sessions with staff to keep the mission and values front and center.
6. Use time-limited task forces in place of permanent committees to create variety and changes in focus. Align the task forces with the strategic initiatives of the organization (and the board’s own development plan). Changes in focus and opportunities to work with a broader number of people will help keep energy high and help build stronger ties between board members.
7. Include the board in “sneak peaks” of policy or strategy development. Too often staff does all the work to present “finished” ideas to the board, which leaves board members out of the crucial initial stages of discussion where their input may help shape ideas. Involving them early on also assures their ‘buy-in’ before staff invests significant time on the project.
8. Encourage “robust” discussions. Use questions such as the following to ensure that you are getting all you can from your board:
 - How do our mission, vision and strategy differ from others in our industry?
 - What three adjectives or short phrases best characterize this organization?
 - What headline would we most want to see written about this organization? What headline would we least want to see?
 - What is the biggest gap between what this organization claims it is and what it actually is?
 - What did we fail to take into account during this discussion?
 - What unintended consequences might we create?

Revisit Your Recruiting

Getting the right people on the bus (or “in the canoe” as we would say in Hawai’i) is as important for a board as it is for the rest of an organization. These recruiting tips can help boost your board’s engagement levels by bringing the right people onboard and getting them off to the best start possible:

1. Recruit for passion and skills above money and professional expertise. Use these criteria: passion for mission; skills in team building and in generative and strategic thinking; independent and inquisitive thinking; and skills and comfort in dealing with volatility, complexity and ambiguity.
2. Set high expectations for a serious and demanding job. Don’t focus on minimum standards. First be sure to clarify expectations with your board. Talk about what you want to be able to expect of each other and include the touchy issues, such as:
 - Regular attendance;
 - What’s confidential and what’s not;
 - Expected contribution levels;
 - Other roles in fundraising;
 - How to handle conflict;
 - Supporting decisions of the board;
 - Relationships with staff and clients;
 - How you will hold each other accountable; and
 - How you will recognize and celebrate success.

Use the results to assess yourselves on a periodic basis and to point out to board prospects how you are different from other boards.

3. Orient new board members well to roles and responsibilities; the board’s mutual expectations; and the organization’s missions, values, strategies and programs.
4. Foster strong interpersonal relationships between board members. Support the acculturation of new board members with buddies who can answer questions and tell the stories that reinforce values and expectations. Ask individual members to update the board on topics which intersect their personal experience and the mission of the board. Find time for fun and enjoyment to reward the board for its efforts.
5. Continue to provide training and encourage questions. Great boards put an emphasis on opportunities to continue to learn. If you can identify learning opportunities that also foster team building or creativity, you double your payback from that investment.
6. Evaluate your recruiting process and your recruits. Do checkpoints with new board members on how things are going. Consider 360-degree reviews for all board members on a periodic basis.
7. Finally, don’t ever ask someone to join your board if they haven’t asked you any questions.

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**Recruit for passion
and skills above money
and professional
expertise**

Incremental and Systemic Change

As you decide how to introduce changes designed to increase the energy and engagement of your board, here are a few quotes to consider:

“We hold on to the belief that change happens as a result of leaders’ actions rather than as a result of *engagement and accountability*.” —Peter Block from *Change is in the Details*

“Successful change occurs one *person* at a time.” — Ken Blanchard, author of *The One Minute Manager*.

An emphasis on “people” and “intentional efforts to increase engagement” can pay off big for your hospice. An initiative has a much higher probability of success if those who are impacted feel that they have had a part in identifying the need and the means of change. Remember that it’s a culture of engagement and accountability that is your ultimate goal. As you build the energy and engagement of your board, you will reap the benefits of the board’s full potential. It can be an investment well worth the time and energy. ↙

Bill Musick is the owner and principal consultant of Tower Hill Resources, an affiliate of The Corridor Group. He is an expert in feasibility analysis of hospice care centers and strategic positioning of hospice and end-of-life care services, with specific interest in working with chief executives and their boards to achieve new levels of effectiveness in the governance of their organizations. He is also a frequent presenter at NHPCO’s national conferences and conducted a session on this topic at NHPCO’s 24th Management and Leadership Conference this past April. Bill can be reached at BMusick@Tower-Hill.com.

Resources:

Daring to Lead 2006—A National Study of Nonprofit Executive Leadership, Jeanne Bell and Timothy Wolfred, CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, and Richard Moyers, The Meyer Foundation; www.compasspoint.org/daringtolead2006.

Boards of Midsize Nonprofits: Their Needs and Challenges, Francie Ostrower, Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy; www.urban.org/publications/411659.html.

Mini-Assessment: Creating an Energetic and High Performing Board, Bill Musick; www.tower-hill.com/survey/board-development.html.

Governance as Leadership—Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards, Richard D. Chair, William P. Ryan, Barbara E. Taylor, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.; www.boardsource.org/Bookstore.asp?Item=161.

The Source—Twelve Principles of Governance that Power Exceptional Boards, BoardSource; www.boardsource.org/Bookstore.asp?query=The+Source.

“What is a Consent Calendar or Consent Agenda?”; www.boardsource.org/Knowledge.asp?ID=3.70.

“What is The World Café?”; www.theworldcafe.com/what.htm.

The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, Patrick Lencioni, Josey-Bass; 2002.

