

Governance Brief

A DARC quarterly piece on nonprofit boards

BUILDING GROUP COHESION AND TEAMWORK

- How to Build a More Effective Board

For most board members, structural changes are more attractive than efforts directed explicitly at relationships, processes, or communications. However, the most effective boards took careful steps to transform an assembly of talented individuals into a well integrated group.

Many board members are comfortable providing individual expertise or advice to the chief executive, while others see their service taking place on a committee related to their area of interest. The most effective boards go beyond these efforts and also emphasize the group as the decision-making unit. A cohesive board makes better decisions than do individuals, while drawing upon members' multiple perspectives to avoid the traps of "group think."

Transforming an assembly of skilled individuals into a well integrated team is a long and difficult process. It requires taking critical issues to the group for deliberation and taking the time necessary to hear the views of each participant. It requires that the issues taken to the board are vital to the future of the organization, not window dressing. It requires making sure that everyone has equal access to information. It requires taking time for members to get to know one another beyond the formal setting of the boardroom.

Better boards pay careful attention to communications among members, to nurturing and sustaining inclusive relationships and a sense of mutual responsibility for the board's success. They are aware that the silent member may have some important concerns that the board needs to hear.

Working to formulate goals for the board itself is a good means for building group cohesion while also serving to focus the board's use of time and energy. Goals for the board itself should be distinct from but lead to the organization's overall goals. Board goals identify specifically what the board will do in order to maximize its contributions to the attainment of the organization's goals.

Board goals should be posted in conspicuous places and repeated in meetings and reports. Keeping the board goals paramount in meetings by means of the agenda plan and the focus of each report or discussion keeps everyone clear about the purpose and direction of each step. It also allows the board to monitor and evaluate its own progress toward its goals.

Formulating specific goals for the board also helps the process of clarifying expectations of the board as a group. It is important to make sure that each participant understands what is expected of him or her as well as how those expectations contribute to overall goals. Setting goals for the board as a whole and periodically reviewing progress toward them serve to maintain the board's attention to its own performance and how it adds value to the organization.

Throughout these steps, an underlying issue is developing a stronger sense of inclusiveness and cohesiveness among board members as a group. This requires paying careful attention to communications among members and intentionally nurturing and sustaining inclusive relationships. These processes should begin at recruitment and orientation, be carried forward by all leaders, and reinforced at social times and retreats.

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