

Paying Attention to your Board

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In spite of what many may secretly believe, our Boards of Directors are vital participants in our organizations. If we don't feel that they are participating much at all, we have to take responsibility to change that. Part of my job of seeing to it that the organization thrives is making sure that the BOARD part of the organization is also thriving. Many of us ignore that part and/or believe that it is the job of the BOARD to see to it that they thrive. And that is when the disappointments and seeming let-downs for both sides start.

When I took over this organization so many years ago, the board said to me, "Just don't ask us to raise money." So I really wondered why I needed them. And I made the biggest mistake of my working career: I paid little attention to the board. I thought they were adults, they agreed to be on the board, they should know what to do, how to behave. This is apparently a common, albeit, costly, mistake. They are adults, yes, but where would they have learned how to be a board member? And how would they know how to work with me and this staff if I didn't tell them? They are great people but they are not mind readers.

I am trying to make the point that we expect much of board leadership and provide little in return. When we, as staff, give the board no direction, we get the same in return. Our boards are as good as the energy WE put into them.

A few years ago I realized the error of my ways (attitude) and grudgingly came to the conclusion that up to half of my job was managing the board. I tell this to people who are complaining to me of their boards and they are horror-stricken. Spend more time on these people who are driving me crazy as it is? Well, yes.

Board members are as much a part of your organization as your programs; they are as important as your clients, just in a different way. These people, if managed well, are a great extension of you. Just like staff, they have skills and connections that you don't have. So how would you manage to get the best out of your staff? You would work to develop their strengths and encourage their growth. In fact, you would probably do almost anything to help your staff be productive. So why don't we spend the same energy on our boards, both as individuals and as a group?

I also think that it takes a longer time than most of us would like to develop an effective Board and that can be discouraging. But we really need to recognize that it will take a while and commit ourselves to taking those baby steps we know will help get us there. Sustained attention to your board will pay off. And that will be a huge contribution to your organization.

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