

Board vs. Staff

Drawing the line between roles and responsibilities

By Lew Carpenter

It's an age-old issue, and one that has had a variety of solutions throughout the history of the federation — where does an organization draw the line between board roles and staff responsibilities?

Certainly, there is no one-size-fits all paradigm for all affiliates, but there are tried-and-true philosophies and methods.

Be the Board

“Much of the confusion about board responsibilities is confusion between what the board should do as a group and what individual board members should do,” advises the staff of Compass Point, a nonprofit consulting organization. “For example although the board as a whole is responsible for evaluating the executive director, the board president as an individual doesn't have that authority that a supervisor has with a subordinate. The board president is not a supervisor, but instead acts as a convener and leader for the board, which as a group provides feedback and direction to the executive director.”

Being a board member is an honor as well as a responsibility. As a board member, your two primary roles are governance and support.

Let's look at developing a strategic plan as an example. In the governance role, the board as a whole (and through its committees) directs policy and strategy — the board establishes a strategy and then measures the success of certain goals.

In the support role (board member role), the individual helps implement policy and strategy as well as deploys resources. Individual board members contribute names, donate, host events, meet with donors, etc. Once a strategy is developed and approved, the work to accomplish it is staff driven — board members serve staff as resources.

Board members who over-manage staff typically hurt the organization's ability to move ahead. Many boards reach this threshold time and time again during their long history, and the ability to enable staff to do the job they were hired for becomes one of releasing a common tendency to grasp tightly

the control of the organization.

Knowing and working on both sides of the board/staff paradigm, Dan Chu, NWF vice president of affiliate and regional strategies, notes that boards providing clarity and strategic direction with desired outcomes for staff are often the most effective boards in the non-profit world.

"We've seen that when board members finally let go of day-to-day management to staff, organizations thrive, or at least move forward," Chu said. "There is a natural tendency for board members to micro-manage staff because they care deeply about their organization, but the bottom line is that staff needs room to create strategies and systems on their own to build a better organization than existed prior to their arrival."

Who's Responsible for the Board doing its Job?

Simply stating that the board sets policy and the staff implements it "fails to distinguish between the governing and supporting roles of the board," according to Compass Point. "The executive director must be largely responsible for the board fulfilling its governance role...the executive director is in the best position for ensuring the effective functioning of the board."

Above all, providing clearly defined board member roles — and then ensuring those roles are adhered to — will inevitably help the organization move forward.

However, many boards develop a document outlining their respective roles — something each board member must sign upon accepting his/her role — they then promptly go about satisfying the status quo.

In Andy Robinson's book *Great Boards for Small Groups*, he highlights that "for many board members, the hardest part of the job is determining where their responsibilities end and staff work begins. Unsure of their role, trustees may attempt to control every operational detail (we call this micromanagement)..."

The best reason to create a clear separation of roles is to ensure the effectiveness of the organization.

"Both the board and the staff have a responsibility to engage each other,"

says NWF Regional Representative John Gale. “For example, the staff must engage the board in fundraising — they simply cannot do it alone and, quite frankly, it is one of the board’s major roles.”

Nick Schroeck, a NWF regional representative in the Great Lakes area has heard complaints from staff about board members micro-managing their work. “The overall direction is fine, but too much monitoring can lead to deflated staff morale and confidence,” he said.

In Peter Drucker’s book *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*, he notes the difference between profit and nonprofit boards are that they are deeply committed. However, “...staff often complain that the board is too much concerned with managing, and that the line between board function and management is constantly being violated. They complain that the board ‘meddles.’”

Which staff role is most commonly encroached upon by board members?

“The biggest encroachment is the board having to review every move of the executive director,” says Matt Little, regional representative from the Pacific Northwest. “From membership drive letters to program decisions, hiring, public statements, use of funds, etc. Lack of trust of a newbie is the biggest reason, especially for those board members who have been around forever.”

When board and staff roles are not clearly identified a host of problems can occur. Bryan Pritchett, NWF senior advisor to the president, says this typically results in the board (or board members) micro-managing the executive director or CEO. “Rarely, if ever, have I seen it happen the other way around - where the staffer starts acting like a board member - but I suppose that could happen.”

Pritchett also notes that when the board (or its members) do get involved in day-to-day management - like office equipment purchases, staff hiring or firing or salary decisions (of staff other than the executive director), sitting in on staff meetings, looking at invoices or receipts, etc. – it could be a signal there are significant problems, therefore, the impact is to send the message to the executive director that there are issues.

“Unfortunately, this it leads to a sense of no confidence,” says Pritchett. “There are a whole host of little issues that arise from this situation, but the

absolute most significant problem is that it directs the organization away from accomplishing its goals and mission. The executive director is spending time justifying actions or covering their ass instead of being focused on raising money, developing and implementing programs, etc.”

The consequences become a self-perpetuating spiral....programs suffer then funders/members lose interest, then programs suffer more, then funders/members lose more interest, etc. “A high functioning board is very clear on the roles of the executive director versus the board and an effective new board member orientation devotes significant time to this to make sure roles are clear for incoming board members,” Pritchett said.

Certain situations, such as the transition a board goes through when hiring a new executive director, call for increased diligence, especially if board members have applied for the staff slot. In addition, board members who take on staff positions must realign themselves in their new role managing the organization. They must release their desire for governance and focus on the important, less glamorous job at hand. Again, it is critical that roles be clear.

At the end of the day the most successful affiliate boards follow two simple rules:

- Through the interaction of the board during formal business of board and committee meetings (governance role), the board is the boss. Board members have individual viewpoints and positions but they alone cannot cause action.

- Through the interaction of the board outside of the formal business of board and committee meetings (support role), staff is the boss. They are directing the board.

The content of this article barely scratches the surface of this common problem facing nonprofit boards. For help in designing a board training program, new board orientation or if you would like a presentation given on this topic, please contact your regional representative. For an example of a signed board roles agreement, contact Lew Carpenter, carpenterl@nwf.org or (303) 834-0998.