

BEST PRACTICES

For ELCA Campus Ministry

TUNING UP YOUR CAMPUS MINISTRY BOARD

Tuning up your board or local governing committee is often like tuning up your car. It takes time and energy you might not have and it seems like a lot of work for not a lot of return—that is until gears begin to grind, the motor coughs and sputters and common rattles turn into serious chassis defects. Deferred maintenance for boards is even more serious than deferred maintenance on your house or car. It can spell disaster down the road for your campus ministry, probably just at the time when you need to rely on your board most for guidance and support. So let's roll up our sleeves and consider a bit of overhauling, so that the next time the rubber hits the road, your board will be finely tuned and ready to run.

John Carver, who has been widely received as a creative thinker when it comes to board development, begins his book, **Boards That Make a Difference**,¹ with these words:

"It takes no scholar to find the problems.... The problem is not that a group or an individual *occasionally* slips into poor practice, but that intelligent, caring individuals regularly exhibit procedures of governance that are deeply flawed. Certain common practices are such obvious drains on board effectiveness that one does not need a sophisticated model to recognize them. Although some boards may avoid a few of the following conditions, rarely does any one board avoid them all." Here are some problems Carver identifies:

1. Time on the trivial

Smaller, insignificant items receive undue attention and energy, while major issues go unresolved.

2. Short-term bias

The time horizon for completing tasks grows evermore distant, while more and more time is spent on little, current issues that make little long-term impact.

3. Reactive stance

Response is made to staff initiatives or trends in the environment, rather than focusing on the long-term vision of the organization.

4. Reviewing, rehashing, redoing

Dysfunctional board behavior is directly related to dwelling on the negatives of the past 5.

5. Leaky accountability

Board members act as loose cannons, with little or no accountability to the official decisions of the board.

6. Diffuse authority

No one is in charge and roles are ill-defined. Authority for making decisions is unclear.

¹ John Carver, *Boards That Make a Difference*, (Jossey-Bass, Inc. Publishers: San Francisco, 1997), pp. 8ff.

If you were to take a careful look at the health of your board, with your board's involvement of course, what needed changes would be most obvious to you? We begin with a description of general board responsibilities. The National Center for Nonprofit Boards lists ten areas:²

- ✓ Determine the organization's mission and purpose
- ✓ Select the chief executive/staff.
- ✓ Support the chief executive/staff and assess their performance.
- ✓ Ensure effective organizational planning.
- ✓ Ensure adequate resources.
- ✓ Manage resources effectively.
- ✓ Determine, monitor, and strengthen the organization's programs and services.
- ✓ Enhance the organization's public standing.
- ✓ Ensure legal and ethical integrity and maintain accountability.
- ✓ Recruit and orient new board members and assess board performance.

As indicated earlier, not every board will be doing all of these things well at all times, but every board ought to be aware of these basic responsibilities and be working toward them with some kind of intentionality.

Beginning at the basic level, look at the task of **board recruitment**. Think about the gifts needed at this point in time to address the needs of your ministry. Do you need financial managers, real estate experts, legal advice, vision planners, public relations specialists, or fundraisers? Instead of grabbing anyone off the street and hoping they can "learn the trade," recruit on the basis of **identified gifts**. Ask other non-profits and organizations in your area who they would recommend for a board such as yours. Make connections at the university, with the synod office, with other community groups. Find out who has been effective on other boards and ask about their interest in serving on yours. It's a kind of courtship, so be prepared for the "no" responses and rejoice in the "yes" ones. Prospective members may be invited to a "trial" meeting before they agree to serve or hold a meeting with the board chair and staff leader. Call the prospective member soon after for feedback.

Develop a **job description** for board members. Spell out what members are asked to do, the term of office, and expectations like attendance and financial support. As you and your current board members talk with new people about serving on your board, they will be curious about what you expect of them. A job description will be a good recruiting tool. Be as specific and straightforward as possible. They are being asked to donate their time, energy and financial support; they deserve to know what they are signing up for.

It might be helpful to you to design a grid that will allow you to chart the gifts of both current and prospective board members. Across the top of the grid make as many columns as you have positions. Down the side list the gifts you are seeking, including age, gender, cultural background, church affiliation, and a long listing of skills and professional qualifications. A sample follows at the end of this document.

² BoardSource, Web site: www.ncnb.org

As you recruit, you will develop a **list of potential candidates**. Some of these folks will have the gifts you need now and will be ready to serve. Others will need to wait in the wings for a time when their skills can be best utilized. Therefore, you should keep a listing of potential board candidates, including the skills they offer and when they are available. In the meantime, they might serve as volunteers or on subcommittees. A **board application form** can gather information about skills and interests and where the person has served previously.

It is highly recommended that one of the important committees of your board be a "**Board Development Committee**." The work of this group is very significant, because they are involved in the recruitment, training, mentoring and evaluating of the board's work. They are the gatekeepers of your organization. They have an ongoing, year-round task that ought not to be shrunk to the quick-minded work of a typical nominating committee that hustles names the night before the annual meeting. Given the scope and responsibility of this committee, you will want to populate it with experienced, savvy board members. If you can get this committee to work effectively, the rest of the board will run smoothly. It's that critical.

Each member of the board should have a **board manual** that contains material relevant to the work of the board. This manual serves two functions. For the new member it provides useful orientation information about board structure, responsibilities and members. For continuing members the manual is a working tool and resource guide. Members are expected to read the book and assist in evaluating it from time to time. A thorough board manual can include the following³:

- ✓ Member listing and bios, including terms
- ✓ Organization chart listing officers and committees
- ✓ Brief history and/or fact sheet
- ✓ Articles of Incorporation and bylaws
- ✓ Vision and mission statement
- ✓ Strategic plan
- ✓ Financial statements, including prior year annual report, most recent audit and current budget
- ✓ Minutes of meetings
- ✓ Board policies and responsibilities
- ✓ Calendar of important dates
- ✓ Interpretation information, including Web site, newsletters, brochures, mailings, etc.

Materials should be added and removed to keep the manual up to date. As items are placed in the manual, they should be dated. Staff in consultation with board officers creates the manual.

James Gelatt has written an insightful article called, "What a Horrible Way to Die."⁴ He laments the amount of time meetings take, often in their busyness detracting from the essential work that needs to be done. He suggests the following ways to ease the pain of meetings:

³ BoardSource, Web site: www.ncnb.org

⁴ James Gelatt, "What a Horrible Way to Die," *Contributions*, March-April, 2003, p. If. He is the author of *Managing Nonprofits in the 21st Century* and general editor of Aspen's Fund Raising Series for the 21st Century.

- **Start your meetings with an objective.** As you build your agenda, decide what the primary purpose of the meeting is and if other agenda items could be accomplished by some other means, such as email or a conference call.
- **Lay out the agenda.** Gelatt says that a good agenda has three parts: 1. Information (time-ordered and significant, not "bring and brag" time), 2. Progress (highlights, questions and future plans), and 3. Decision-making (items that require board action and resources).
- **Decide who should attend.** Not everyone needs to be at all meetings. Those invited should be: 1. those with information, 2. those with power to decide, and 3. those who need to be accountable (peer pressure is one of the values of meetings).
- **Prepare for the meeting.** Written reports, including power point presentations, are usually a waste of time as part of the agenda and can be read in advance. Think through what needs to be shared face-to-face and have the material ready in concise, helpful ways. Don't find yourself at the copy machine 15 minutes into the meeting.
- **Check in and check out.** There is a real human need to connect with people before trying to make decisions with them. Set aside limited time before and after your meeting for people to connect. It will give you a chance to hear what's on their hearts and minds.
- **Make minutes brief.** There is little use in recording everything that goes on at your meeting. You should record only the "action items" or future directions. Reports can be noted as an appendix and should be sent in advance. Brief questions about reports may be in order, but not prolonged. Likewise, a financial statement can be sent in advance.
- **Anticipate.** Prior to the meeting ask yourself, which items are most likely to cause disagreement or get us off course? Can you structure the agenda to anticipate the discussion, e.g. early items generally generate the most discussion time. If there is an item that will require research or forethought, send it out in advance and ask for feedback prior to the meeting. Will seating arrangements or a process for discussion make a difference?
- **Assign roles.** Who leads? Who records? Who reports? Is there a role for a facilitator from the outside? Can these roles rotate?
- **Agree on ground rules.** These might include being on time, reading reports before the meeting, speaking both honestly and sensitively, and agreeing to not process board decisions outside the board meeting.
- **Train members in problem solving and decision-making.** This may best be done at a time of minimal conflict and general well being. Use case studies or "what if" scenarios to prepare the board for times when they will need to use these skills.
- **Assess effectiveness.** At the conclusion of every meeting, spend 5 minutes asking, "How did we do this time?" Was the meeting useful? Are there ways we can improve? Always hold an annual evaluation that contains both written and verbal feedback.

As you consider ways to streamline your board meetings and make them more effective, consider these two options.

1. **Dashboard.** A dashboard is a quick way of getting a read on the health and vitality of your organization. It might consist of a brief financial report, showing the levels of income and expense over the past 3 years in graph form. It might chart worship attendance and other ways to do a quantitative analysis of your ministry. It might show numbers of religious preference cards, congregations who sent names of

incoming students, or those who signed up during fall orientation. Put on the dashboard anything that will help your board members get a quick sense of your status—just like the driver of a car looks to the dashboard for fuel levels, speed, mileage, or emergency indicators.

2. **Consent Agenda.** As mentioned above, there are many reports that can be sent to board members prior to the meeting. These should include secretary's reports, staff reports, treasurer's reports and other information that needs to be read and pondered at some length. These can be easily expedited by email or fax, with suggested changes attended to promptly. At the meeting there can be a brief time for questions or comments. Then the entire consent agenda is passed with one vote, becoming part of the record of the meeting.

This is clearly a time to think creatively and outside the box when it comes to board development. A church agreed that its council (made up of mostly young executives) would not meet in a typical boardroom with tables and comfortable chairs. Instead the room would only allow members to stand as reports were received and motions deliberated. Reportedly, meetings lasted no more than 45 minutes, in part because a lot of work was done in subcommittees and only the most important decisions came to the council. Someone thought creatively about how to keep board members fresh, thoughtful, focused and literally "on their feet."

