



## Keys for a Better Functioning Board

A good part of my work is spent with Executive Directors and members of the organization's Board of Directors examining how the executive and fiduciary governors can work together more effectively and efficiently. This article provides some feedback on seven areas that seem to offer the most challenges for Boards. The key to a successful Board is methodically addressing all of these issues.

**1. Accountability** – is there a strong Governance Committee that can “hold the Board accountable” to its practices? Board members themselves must hold each other accountable; the staff cannot perform this function. The Governance Committee or similar standing committee ensures Board terms are applied, conducts thorough Board recruitment, conducts Board member orientation, conducts regular in-depth reviews of Board member roles and responsibilities, evaluates annual Board member performance, and guides the Board on relevant training and learning opportunities.

**2. Meetings** – are Board meetings substantive and educational and how many meetings are needed to do Board business? Start with the topics the Board needs to address and then build an annual calendar from there. With e-mail opportunities for approval and/or quick discussion topics, there may be less need for Executive Committee meetings and/or a high frequency of meetings. Consider an annual or bi-annual full or half day Board retreat to be spent on long range planning and analysis. Review committee structures and decide what could be done in a ‘task force’ effort versus establishing new standing committees that might be more inclined to attempt to micromanage or monitor senior management work.

**3. Training** – are there topics that would help Board members better understand the landscape of nonprofits or the organization's mission and programming? Perhaps an expert on a topic in social enterprise, social change, or nonprofit finances can be brought in. Poll the Board and build a calendar of important training topics (i.e. succession planning, fundraising best practices, etc). People enjoy being on a Board where they learn and where the topics and speakers are stimulating and/or invigorating.

**4. Strategic Focus** – how do you make sure the Board conversation stays strategic and at “30,000 feet” rather than members trying to micromanage the organization, overstepping into staff functions? Consider selecting a Board meeting monitor who is specifically responsible for identifying Board conversations that may be inclining towards micromanagement versus asking the Executive Director “how can we support/help you carry out the vision and plan we all have set?”

**5. Recruitment** – what are the qualities one is looking for in people who join the Board? Boards

[www.ImaginePhilanthropy.com](http://www.ImaginePhilanthropy.com)

[tuti@imaginephilanthropy.com](mailto:tuti@imaginephilanthropy.com)

516.380.0923



are ideally composed of an important mix of talents and experiences. Before welcoming new board members, the Board may want to identify 'voices' already at the table and think creatively about other types of voices needed to advance the organization's agenda (whether it's from a broader geographic region, younger generation, a visible celebrity, a private family foundation member, an entrepreneur, etc.). Board recruitment should also include examination of prospective member qualities such as depth of inquiry, fondness for discourse, commitment, and team play. Often people now look deeper at the social, political, intellectual capital and the reputational assets the person brings to the table in addition to skills and experience.

**6. Orientation** – how can we motivate members to contribute ideas? An often overlooked task of a Board is a thorough orientation process. Highly functioning Boards have established handbooks and orientation steps that are built into the recruitment process. Consider having the Governance Committee work with the Executive Director to establish an energizing orientation process to educate Board members about the impact of the work of the organization. Also, assigning 'mentors' (seasoned Board members) to sit with new members and be available in between meetings for the first year can be helpful.

**7. Evaluation** – how do we address a Board member who is not participating at the level requested? Each Board member should be asked annually about his/her vision for the organization and how he/she intends to contribute to this vision. Hopefully this reflection will trigger each Board member to self-assess their contribution(s) as well as prompt thoughts with regards to evaluating the group's strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, during the conversation, the commitment of other Board members can be described and one can astutely steer the person to recognizing where their commitment is falling short. An ideal outcome is for the person to see that another person with more energy, time, and dedication should take their Board seat.