

Take Boardmanship at your nonprofit to a whole new level

Q. Our board members and the board as a whole has had a lot of training and read a lot about the duties of a nonprofit board. We have a board manual and policies and procedures in place. We have a governance committee that does a good job with recruitment, orientation, annual evaluation and keeping our policies, procedures, and manual current. Our board meeting uses a Consent Agenda and the focus for each board meeting includes fiduciary, strategic and/or generative matters. And this is where our job as board members begin and end. I feel like something is missing.

A. What you are describing, for want of alternative language, is transactional governance. The board, based on your description, is fulfilling its fundamental fiduciary duties and your board should be complimented for its efficiency. At the same time, all the “order” installed in the board is just that: order. But, these same mechanisms do not bind members in their efforts to conduct transactions that reinforce what brought members to the board in the first place. Nor, I would pose, do all these transactions translate into action that provides the members with a feeling of mission and purpose. What is not addressed in transactional governance (playing by the rulebook, fulfilling legal responsibilities) is the relationships between the members, the exec and the community.

What is missing I further pose, is the non-transactional ingredients – the relational elements that in effect are the glue that holds the boards together; stimulates the passion. Relational governance relational results in inclusivity and equalizes the field capturing tastes and values and motives and most importantly, engagement.

Does any of the following sound familiar: members don’t listen when a member speaks; members “talk over” each other, decisions may get made but with little depth and/or focus; there’s often not even enough members to constitute a by-law defined quorum; and, maybe members just don’t like each other and would never otherwise be in the same room for any other occasion. What is happening is transactional governance, getting the job done but without the passion and the motives to do more than, maybe, come to the board meeting.

A relational governance framework can, I believe change what goes on between board members, and board members and staff and board members and the community, including donors. A relational governance framework can take nonprofit boardmanship to a whole new level – one that is motivating and captivating and addresses the many challenges nonprofit boards face today.

So what might be steps to install relational governance in your board? Some suggestions include:

- a. The board chair should meet at least once a year if not bi-annually with each board member to hear their thoughts about how they are doing as board members pursuing their own personal passions and fulfilling their fiduciary duties and also provide insights about how

they believe the organization is doing. (And yes, the governance committee could take on this task and report to the Chair);

- b. The Chair should can insert a relational “moment” as a part of every board meeting. Examples include asking members to share since the previous meeting, one experience they had that really pleased or excited them or talk about a good book or movie and why they think so. This relationship building activity will prove helpful when it comes time to discuss more difficult organizational matters as this will provide deeper understanding to members as to the rationale that informs discussion and decisions;
- c. A buddy system should be put in place to ensure every board member is “accompanied” on their journey as a member. Buddies should schedule at least a quarterly “meet’ with their buddy where they too can talk about goals and assess progress as well as ensure that the governance committee is aware of any pitfalls or challenges with policies and processes;
- d. Board meetings should include a mission moment that involves some sharing (likely by staff or a consumer) about a program, it’s benefits and challenges. An extra moment should provide members with time to ask questions and engage with each other to discuss how this program furthers mission and what future discussions should be conducted from a strategic and generative (problem solving) perspective; and,
- e. Board orientations and annual meetings should include the basic transactional materials but should also include team building or getting-to-know you activities or exercises.

Relational governance, in summary moves a board from efficiency to effectiveness with an appreciation that decision-making is not made in a vacuum of “just the facts” but involves passions, values and experiences that are not otherwise reflected in the regular conduct of business. Relational governance will not only improve “business” but engage members with each other and motivate more action externally. Remember, donors and the community don’t really support institutions: they support the individuals behind the institution.