

Power in... and Around Nonprofit Boards

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It's always a challenge to work in any group setting. Here's something that may be useful to your organization.

CEO-DOMINATED BOARD

A CEO-dominated board tends to be more of a figurehead than a major influence on the organization. It depends heavily on guidance from the CEO, who is a paid professional manager, and sometimes from a few high-level paid staff who are part of the CEO's team. The paid staff is highly influential and is trusted because of their expertise, experience, and track record of successfully managing the organization. The board does not take an active role in the creation of plans or budgets other than to scan them before giving its approval. It usually tends to do this without much disagreement or debate. Meetings of the board tend to be formal and orderly with clear distinctions between the roles and responsibilities of the board and the staff.

CHAIR-DOMINATED BOARD

A chair-dominated board is heavily influenced - one might say controlled - by its elected leader, whether that leader is the president or the board chair. This person has a certain charismatic - for some, an intimidating - quality that exerts a strong influence over board members. If there is a paid CEO, that person plays a distinct second fiddle to the elected leader, and mainly tries to carry out a role defined by that leader. The leader selects other board members through personal acquaintance and/or their belief in the leader's vision. Disagreements at meetings rarely arise, either because a potential opponent to the leader is too intimidated to speak or because no one could imagine an alternate point of view in the first place. If there are plans for the organization, they tend to spring full-blown from the mind of the leader. The leader is well connected in the community and maintains positive relations with key people inside and outside the organization.

FRAGMENTED POWER BOARD

A fragmented power board tends to be characterized by conflict. Various individuals or groups on the board represent differing beliefs or ideologies about what the organization should be doing and why. These factions may represent the interest of outside groups that have a stake in the organization, such as different client groups, minorities, funders, etc. Meetings of this type of board tend to be stormy, and the group finds it difficult to make decisions. Because of the divisions in the organization, strategic planning is rarely attempted. Board members cast much blame when things go wrong and resignations on principle are possible. Considerable politicking goes on before major decisions are made, and game playing of various kinds is seen as common board behaviour. Associated with all of this is a heightened awareness of who has much power and influence and the presence of competition for the most powerful positions.

POWER-SHARING BOARD

The members of a power-sharing board share a strong commitment to the values of equality and democracy. The board rejects any kind of dominant leadership by one person or group, instead insisting on processes such as equal participation in decision-making and extensive communication and consultation with all interested parties related to any given issue. Conflict certainly arises but the board members tend to keep talking until they reach consensus. Similarly, there is a de-emphasis on formal positions, titles, and fixed committees. Instead, ad hoc working groups seem to spring up spontaneously when things need to be done. On the other hand, it is sometimes difficult to achieve major changes or launch big new projects because it takes so much time to work through the consultative, consensus-based form of decision-making.

POWERLESS BOARD

Aimlessness and uncertainty characterize a powerless board. No one is too clear about the board's roles and responsibilities but then no one seems to care too much about it either. There is little in the way of strong leadership from any source, either board or paid staff. Things get done either because the board repeats past practices or because some individual has an idea and is allowed to carry it out as long as he/she is prepared to do most of the work. Apathetic and aimless are two objectives that sum up the climate of such board. Meetings tend to be poorly organized, poorly attended, and indecisive. Planning in any form is absent, and there is a lack of both upward and downward communication.