

# How Well Does Your Board Communicate?

*Rate your board—and yourself.*

BY LARRY D. LAUER

**H**ow well do your board members communicate? How well do you communicate with them? The answers to these questions will tell you how effective your organization is, for communication is at the root of organizational competence.

Here are the five most crucial areas of board communication. After reading about each area, score your organization's top executive, board chair, and the board as a whole. Circle the appropriate number between 1 and 10 (10 = needs no improvement; 1 = couldn't be worse).

**1**

**Financial and Other Support**

<b>Board score:</b>	10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<b>Board chair score:</b>	10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
<b>CEO score:</b>	10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Finding and giving money is a well-acknowledged function of a nonprofit board. Even so, many board members give only lip service to raising money and to contributing their own money. Why? Usually it's because expectations were not clear at the outset and the board chair and chief executive are not leading the way.

Nonprofits must have clear policies about the board's role in fundraising. All too many recruit new board members by telling them their name is important to the organization's credibility and that they won't need to do much. This approach is counterproductive. The need for support eventually leads to a

board meeting focused on the question, "What will board members be expected to give?" Inevitably many trustees reply, "This was not made clear to me when I agreed to serve."

Some organizations solve this problem by creating board "job descriptions." They recruit some board members to help raise money, some to donate professional services, and others to participate in community activities. They spell out these expectations in each board member's letter of invitation. Before taking office, board members sign a sheet stating that they understand their duties and agree to fulfill them.

Board involvement in marketing activities beyond fundraising can also be quite productive. Board members have contributions to make in many areas, such as:

- participating in special events
- motivating others to participate
- spreading the organization's message
- making contacts
- securing technology resources
- offering expertise in sales, strategic planning, advertising, and public relations.

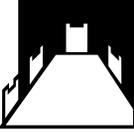
Like fundraising, marketing is an area in which every board member can and should contribute something.

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## 2 Participation

**Board score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**Board chair score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**CEO score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Too many nonprofits achieve counterproductive results when they focus on keeping the board at arm's length. Fears of board control and meddling limit the board's participation and potential to help.

Certainly you can't let board members micro-manage your organization. But broadening what board members can do will increase their sense of involvement. They need to feel they are a part of your organization's fabric.

Board motivation comes from a feeling of "we." When board members talk of their organization, they need to always say "we." You can't tell them to raise money and otherwise stay away. Give them opportunities to participate, and let them know they are a meaningful part of your organization.

## 3 Relationship with Staff

**Board score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**Board chair score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**CEO score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Many nonprofits put so much emphasis on discouraging relationships between board and staff members that they overlook the benefits of such board-staff bonds. It's true, of course, that some board-staff interactions are improper. A board member should never bypass the CEO and discuss a problem with a staff member. A staff person shouldn't complain directly to someone on the board. (When such contacts occur, they show that an effective problem-solving plan hasn't been put in place. Such a plan should be created as quickly as possible.)

But there are many appropriate ways for board and staff to work together. For example, staff and board members can collaborate on a marketing plan. The board can articulate a vision and review a proposed marketing plan. Professional staff can suggest marketing ventures and provide support. The staff will carry out some actions and the board will implement others. Steering and planning committee membership can represent both.

## 4 Unified Team Commitment

**Board score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**Board chair score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**CEO score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

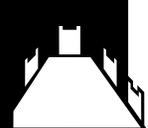
In the effective organization, board and staff have the same objectives and vision. They share a commitment to a vital and exciting future. Only through effective communication can staff and board members create such a team.

Some boards build meetings around getting to know key staff and what they do—their problems and possibilities. Other boards invite staff to receptions before certain board meetings. One nonprofit organization invites board members to visit operations to see firsthand what clients look like and how they are handled. There are many "structured" ways to involve board members without giving them operational control. The more of these you use, the more motivated your board members will become.

## 5 Word-of-Mouth Support in the Community

**Board score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**Board chair score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
**CEO score:** 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**When top people share their excitement about an organization, the place "looks" important.**



## You can't tell board members to raise money and otherwise stay away.

All the materials in the world can't create a public perception of vitality the way energized leaders can. When top people share their excitement about an organization with others, the place "looks" important.

It's up to the board chair and CEO to motivate board members to represent the organization proudly in the community. The CEO must design communication to inspire board members to "tell the story" regularly.

### How Do You Rate?

If you scored a 5 or lower on any of these areas, you have work to do. Don't despair; you're not alone. Communication is the most overlooked realm of the nonprofit sector. Yet it is also the ticket to a nonprofit organization's productivity and survival. ■

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