



Turn Your Board Members into Strong Owners

Bring your strategic plan to life by involving your board.

By Doug Eadie

A few years ago, a nonprofit executive told me about a serious error of judgment during his first 18 months on the job. “It was immediately obvious,” he told me, “that one of the most pressing CEO challenges I’d have to address was the need for an updated strategic plan.” He knew he had to get going on the strategic planning front, and that’s what he did.

Ownership and commitment are natural partners.

First, he sent requests for proposals to eight consulting firms to help spearhead the strategic planning effort. Several weeks later, a firm was under contract, and the strategic planning show was on the road.

The consulting team reviewed a mountain of documentation, interviewed board members and staff, and met with the staff steering com-

mittee to review sections of the strategic plan as they were drafted. The CEO briefed the board on progress at its regular meetings, but that was the extent of board involvement. The board, by the way, didn’t have a planning committee, which would have been a natural candidate for more detailed involvement.

The finished strategic plan was beautifully crafted, and the board unanimously adopted it. Armed with agreement at the top, the CEO could move forward, launching new initiatives.

And everyone worked happily ever after, right? If you’ve spent much time working with boards, you know that wasn’t the case. Over the next several months, the initiatives that were submitted to the board for approval were debated endlessly. Clearly, the delibera-

tions weren’t being guided by the strategic plan.

So this admirable plan didn’t have much impact. A year after it was adopted, it was gathering dust and never consulted.

Why this sad ending? Not because the plan was technically deficient but because the process of producing the plan treated board members as an audience for finished consultant work, rather than turning them into real owners.

TWO KEYS TO BOARD OWNERSHIP

Board-savvy CEOs pay close attention to transforming board members into strong owners of their work. Such work includes the decisions they make and the “products” they generate (for example, an updated vision statement, the annual budget, a set of strategic goals). Experience has taught these CEOs that board members who feel like owners make more reliable partners who can be depended on not to fade away when the going gets tough.

So how can you turn your board members into real owners of their governing work and products?

Why this sad ending?
Because board members were treated as an audience for finished consultant work.

You must ensure that your board members are involved in doing the following:

- **Map out the processes** (for example, strategic planning, budgeting, performance monitoring) for involving board members in making the judgments that constitute their governing work. What board work sessions, for instance, will be held as the annual budget document is being developed? What will board members do in these sessions? Who will run them?

- **Ensure board members are involved** in shaping the governing products. Get them involved early enough to shape outcomes, and make full use of their intelligence, experience, and diverse perspectives.

FOUR CRITICAL STEPS

Board-savvy CEOs follow four concrete steps to turn their board members into owners of their governing work:

- **Create standing committees** that correspond to the actual flows

of governing decisions. These committees should include, for example, planning, board self-assessment, and external relations.

- **Use these standing committees as vehicles** to involve board members in governing and to continuously update the processes for board-member involvement.

- **Develop operating guidelines for board committees** that promote board member ownership.

- **Ensure that committee chairs visibly succeed** in leading their committees. ■

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More Resources for High-Impact Boards

For more on turning board members into owners of their work, see these *Nonprofit World* articles at www.snpo.org/members:

Can Standing Committees Contribute to High-Impact Governing? (Vol. 25, No. 2)

How to Talk to Your Board (Vol. 23, No. 1)

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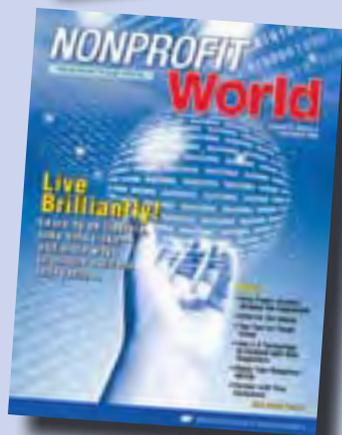
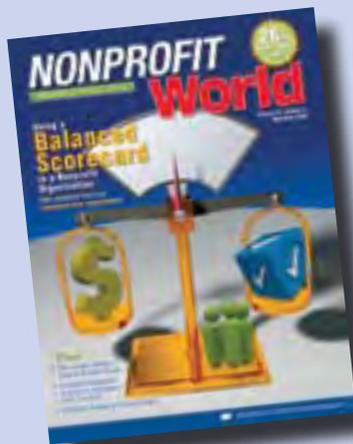
Leading and Managing Governance Change (Vol. 26, No. 3)

Rethinking the Nonprofit Board (Vol. 27, No. 6)

How to Assess and Improve Your Board's Performance (Vol. 24, No. 1)

35 Questions that Will Transform Your Board (Vol. 24, No. 3)

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