What to do when leading becomes misleading.

BY EUGENE H. FRAM & ROBERT F. PEARSE

Managing Your MISGUIDED Optimists

Effective nonprofit management depends on good relations among board members, skilled volunteers, and the organization's management group. All these stakeholders must keep their focus on the organization's mission, vision, and values. At times, however, some people lead a nonprofit off target through incomplete or tangential planning.

Such people work with good intentions, but they can mislead the organization with unsuitable proposals, projects, and ideas. Consequently, we have named them "misguided optimists."

Who Are the Misguided Optimists?

Misguided optimists most often come from the ranks of board members. They are eager to share what they've learned in their own corporations, sincerely believing that it will solve the nonprofit's problems.

For example, one marketing "expert" volunteered to develop a marketing plan for a nonprofit on whose board he served. The plan turned out to be complicated and cumbersome. In trying to implement it, the nonprofit's staff spent endless time developing meaningless reports.

Another misguided optimist is the volunteer specialist who provides a service or product "free of charge." One volunteer, for instance, installed her favorite accounting software without cost to the nonprofit. However, the software proved to be inefficient, expensive, and time consuming when adapted by the organization.

Confronting misguided optimists, whether they are board members or volunteer specialists, rarely works. Not only will they resent rejection of their offers, but they'll often make their disgruntlement public. Imagine the negative consequences of such remarks as this: "I offered to donate days of time to help the organization. The staff lacked the insight to execute my innovative plan. Who can help such a backward organization?"

Even worse, you may find your board siding with these misguided optimists. Especially if volunteers are charismatic and influential, board members may urge you to accept their offers against your better judgment.

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Even when it's obvious that donated services are counterproductive, board members are unlikely to openly criticize such volunteer efforts. The unwritten norm assumes that all pro bono efforts should be accepted uncritically because they are so well intentioned.

Survival Strategies for the Executive Director

How, then, should you treat misguided optimists without alienating or discouraging them? Here are some useful strategies:

Adopt Part of the Plan. You can contain the situation by adopting part of the proposal or using some of the volunteered "expertise." If the partial adoption succeeds, you can ask for more. If it doesn't, you can end the project cordially.

Use Delays to Generate Insight. If you can delay the project, the volunteer who made the offer may lose enthusiasm.

Even better, the volunteer may come to recognize the project's limitations. When this happens, the executive director is viewed in a positive light, not as one who is retarding progress.

Use Low-Risk Pilot Projects. At one time or another, your board may pressure you to launch questionable fundraising proposals. Usually these plans require significant expense and staff time. Rather than embracing or rejecting such a plan, suggest conducting a trial phase. If the trial proves unworkable, you can then abandon the larger plan.

Have Board Members Fund a Project. Another approach is to suggest that board members pay part or all of the project costs. Then, if the project is unreasonably expensive, the organization won't have to bear the brunt of the problem.

Reduce the Momentum. Another survival approach is to slow the implementation process. A leisurely implementation may expose the project's limited payouts. For example, one member of a small nonprofit's board wanted to develop an endowment fund. Because the organization had no affluent constituency or public image that could attract large donations, the executive director knew that the project would result in wasted effort. As a survival technique, she worked personally with the board member to begin the plan. However, she did not involve other board members in the endowment effort. They continued to raise funds in their usual way. As anticipated, the endowment project ran into trouble, and the well-meaning board member quietly dropped the idea. The board members who had continued their usual fundraising exceeded their goals.

Form a Committee. A classic survival strategy is to form a board-staff committee to study the proposal. It then becomes the responsibility of the committee, not the executive director, to tell the project's supporters that the idea isn't feasible.

Survival Strategies for Board Members

What if the misguided optimist is the executive director? This happens more often than you might think. Even excellent executives can get carried away by a bad plan. Sometimes they return from a conference overly sold on an idea they feel will automatically transform the organization. They may push the board to adopt the idea prematurely. Or they may attempt to install the idea in a way that results in an unproductive "quick fix." For example, many organizations are trying to "re-engineer" the entire organization without adequate planning.

If you're a board member with a misguided executive, what should you do? Here are tips that will help you handle such situations:

Take a Direct Approach. You can be more straightforward than the executive can be with a misguided board member. Since the board has ultimate responsibility for the organization's survival and growth, you should be direct in approaching the executive. Tactfully but firmly, explain why you think the project is inappropriate. The executive will usually listen if you speak to what will benefit the organization in the long run.

Use a Coaching Posture. To get your viewpoint across, take a mentoring or coaching posture with the executive director. Use such strategies as joint problem solving, collaborating, and tying motivational tactics to goal development.

People with good intentions can mislead the organization with unsuitable proposals, projects, and ideas.

Use Outside Review Strategies. What if your direct collaborative appeal does not produce agreement, and the executive still supports the untenable project? In that case, you can urge a review by a consultant or other outside authority. For example, you could ask other executive directors for their experiences with similar projects. If such colleagues feel the idea has shortcomings, you can summarize their findings or have your executive talk with them directly.

Use Political Action. Under this approach, you can review the project with other board members and ask for their "votes" on the proposal's merit. If most people vote "no," the executive will find it difficult to go ahead with the project. While this approach is effective, it may lead to rifts within the board or between the board and executive. Thus, you should use it only as a last resort.

Survival Strategies for the Organization

The best way to handle misguided optimists is to develop a high-performance organization. Such an organization has mechanisms in place to review all plans. These mechanisms will help you judge every proposal in terms of its contribution to key organizational goals. They'll make it easy for you to ferret out and discard poorly conceived projects.

Developing such a climate will diminish unproductive conflict while preserving people's dignity. In the long run, that's the best way to manage your misguided optimists and keep them from misguiding you. ■

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