

Does Your Board Need to Get Out More?

Should your board focus on your organization or spend time working outside the board room?

Q I'm involved with the United Way in my community. Lately I've noticed a focus on the board "looking outward." A friend of mine is on another board, and she is hearing that the board needs to spend more time working outside the board room. I always thought that as directors our major focus should be on fiduciary oversight. Can you explain why we're hearing something different all of a sudden?

A The United Way has long been in the forefront when it comes to introducing good governance practice to a community. What you describe really isn't so new, but often it takes a while for proven practices to work their way throughout communities.

Allow me to provide a little history. Back in 2004, Dick Chait, Bill Ryan, and Barbara Taylor — all associated with the Hauser Center for Nonprofits at Harvard University — wrote *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (John Wiley & Sons), in which they suggested boards have three responsibilities. One, obviously, is the fiduciary oversight you mention. The other two are strategic and generative thinking.

As you might guess, strategic thinking is looking at issues, plans, and decisions with a big-picture, future orientation. Generative thinking is making sense of cues from the community, looking at them in relationship to past experiences, and reframing them for the future. How can any director interpret cues without being out in the community, listening to stakeholders, and judging the organization's impact (or lack of impact) on the people it serves?

The process of interacting with stakeholders and looking at impact beyond the numbers is what Chait, Ryan, and Taylor call "working at the boundary" and Richard Harwood (upon whose work the United Way has modeled its approach) calls "looking outward." Simply, it builds on the recognition that our directors can be extremely valuable outside the board room, impassioning others, mustering resources, increasing access to diverse talent, and using what they learn to help inform decisions.

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There are many techniques you can use to help board members make that shift beyond the boardroom. I'll share just a few here:

- **Set aside 15-20 minutes at each board meeting.** Have directors share what they've learned in their day-to-day interactions that might prove an opportunity for — or threat to — your organization and your clients. Such reporting opens the door to a cost-benefit analysis to ensure that the organization remains responsive to community needs.
- **Ask that directors develop ongoing relationships with media and legislative personnel who share an interest in your organization's mission.** The key here is "ongoing." The idea is to create true relationships, based on give and take. Offer statistics, quotes, and access to expert sources that board members can use in building these relationships.
- **Use social media to encourage people in the community to connect with your board members.** At the very least, your board chair should have a blog and solicit feedback from blog readers. This is a great way to hear how the community feels about what you're doing.
- **Encourage all board members to set up Google alerts (google.com/alerts) related to your mission.** Such alerts are an excellent way for them to keep up with critical issues, developments, and statistics.
- **Have directors conduct mission-based tours of your organization for the community (as appropriate) and ask for questions as well as comments.** The insights gathered will be very valuable when doing planning.
- **Suggest that board members meet with colleagues on other boards** with similar or complementary missions to exchange information.

What's exciting about "working at the boundaries" and "looking out" is that directors are no longer focused solely on their own organization or the relatively limited impact it can make on its clients. Rather, they become central players in affecting the larger community. They see that they're truly making a difference, and they become more engaged than ever before. It's a true win for everyone involved.

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