



Board Member

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Organizational Champions

By Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D.

In an environment of fluctuating funding, increased accountability, and competing priorities, volunteer board members must be skilled champions for the organizations they serve. A chief executive and the management team simply can't do it all. They need access to spheres of influence and talents that board members can leverage on behalf of the organization. The good news is that most board members genuinely desire to do meaningful work and to contribute to the organization's success. The bad news is that board members remain an untapped asset in many organizations. What is behind this oversight, and what can be done about it?

When board members respond to surveys about their roles and responsibilities, they include the standard "fiduciary oversight, hiring and firing the chief executive, supporting leadership and a fundraising give-or-get." But only a few mention a role in community relations that would support the organization's efforts.

Sometimes board members' talents are underutilized in this area because chief executives fear these mem-

bers will send mixed messages or even promote personal agendas. This fear can stem from experiences with a few "renegade" board members who used their board roles as forums to advocate for special interests.

In other cases of underutilization, individual board members may lack in-depth organizational knowledge because of inadequate orientation or because board members bring faulty assumptions about their roles and responsibilities from previous board service

where being a champion wasn't part of the job. With only a superficial knowledge of mission, values, priorities, plans, challenges and opportunities, board members cannot become institutional champions. In the worst-case scenario, lack of meaningful involvement leads to missing-in-action board members who serve in name only and don't assert their role as organizational champions.

Board members who want to become organizational champions should try

these techniques:

- Assert your need to be actively involved in the strategic planning process, but explain that it is driven by a desire to be better informed and vest-

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ed in the organization's mission, challenges, and opportunities in order to champion its efforts.

- Ask for talking points from the organization's community relations or strategic communications department to use in specific situations (in the manner of an "elevator speech") about the organization's mission, programs, special initiatives or fundraising campaigns.
- Keep senior staff informed of board members' special interests so they can tap into them. Management may have selected board members based on a sphere of influence, name recognition or fundraising abilities and may not be aware of other ways to leverage their talents.
- Ask to be accompanied by a senior staff member at community meetings.

Chief executives who want to enhance board contributions to community relations should try these tips:

- Involve board members early in the development of the strategic plan. This ensures greater buy-in, can be used for defining and assigning board roles, and enables board members to be more articulate when in community relations activities.
- Ask current, new and prospective board members about their passion for the organization to get them connected or reconnected with their reasons for joining. Channel these into championing, fundraising or friend-raising efforts.
- Keep track of board member "capital" — connections, networks, talents, experience and special interests — to make it easy to quickly tap into

when you need to make contact and establish trust.

- Have one or more senior staff members accompany board members to community meetings.
- Make sure that senior staff and the full board receive feedback from any event attended by a board member.

BoardSource's *The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance That Power Exceptional Boards* reinforces the concept of the board as institutional champions. It states, "Exceptional boards not only make personal and meaningful contributions but also stretch further for special campaigns..."

Serving as the community face of the organization, they advocate on behalf of the organization in appropriate public contexts." Most board members are genuinely excited by the thought of actively working on the organization's behalf because it reawakens their interest in the organization and reminds them why they joined. Take hold of that passion and begin to leverage it!

RESOURCES

"Exploring the Puzzle of Board Design: What's Your Type?" by David Renz. *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, Winter 2004.

Nonprofit Board Answer Book II: Beyond the Basics by Robert C. Andringa. BoardSource, 2002.

Barbara Kaufman, Ph.D. is president of ROI Consulting Group (www.roiconsultinggroup.com). An executive coach and educator, Kaufman specializes in leadership effectiveness and organizational development strategies for private and public sector leadership teams and boards. She can be reached at drbarbkaufman@earthlink.net.

A CONSISTENT MESSAGE

Leadership California, which moves successful women leaders into roles of greater significance and influence, has board members who are very hands-on in fundraising and friend-raising. "Since we want to make sure that they can convey an articulate and consistent message about the organization, we give them talking points," says Executive Director Pam Hemann. "It's a one-page document that defines who we are, summarizes our history and discusses how we achieve our goals through good relationships and partnerships with organizations and individual supporters."

A second set of talking points comes into play when board members contact prospective supporters or member organizations. "We give the board member information about our history if any, with the organization she is visiting, our objective in making contact and why we believe a relationship with that organization is important," says Hemann. "In preparing board members to establish contacts, we also tap into their unique passions for Leadership California. For example, if our program has made a difference in a board member's life, she will be able to speak with great passion about her own experience when addressing a group of women at a recruitment reception."