

Fostering an Active, Engaged Board

An effective, engaged board of directors is a tremendous asset to any nonprofit organization. A passive, unfocused board is not only unhelpful; it actually drains staff time from more productive work. Thurlow/Associates helps to maximize the impact of nonprofit boards through a combination of assessment, training, consultation and coaching. Here are some of the things the most effective boards have in common:

Up-to-date information: Staff members live and breathe their organization's work each day. All too often, there's an assumption that board members are just as familiar with the nonprofit's mission, services and funding needs — even though they only interact with the nonprofit once a month or even less. In addition to orienting new board members, remember to take time at each board meeting to provide more information about your work — a brief summary of one of your programs, the story of a client whose life you've changed, or an update about your new service line, for example. It's information board members can use to advocate on your behalf.

Defined roles: We've talked with many board members who were unsure about what was expected of them and what they should be doing to help their nonprofit organization. We've also heard many staff members express frustration that board members weren't pulling their weight. (Perhaps not surprisingly, we sometimes hear these things from the same organization.) We offer training that helps to clarify board responsibilities — and the appropriate division of labor between board and staff. The training sessions also offer opportunities for board members to discuss additional information they need to achieve their goals.

Established goals and objectives: Speaking of which...it's important for the board to establish broad goals, and measurable, achievable, time-bound objectives. (Committees will want to consider their own goals and objectives, in support of the overarching measures established by the board.) Then, take some time at every meeting agenda to review the goals and objectives and discuss progress.

The ability (and desire) to cultivate relationships: One of the most valuable roles a board member plays for any nonprofit organization is that of relationship-builder. Among other things, board members can help identify additional prospects for volunteer leadership and make connections with prospective funding sources. But, see above: The more board members know about your organization, the more they understand their roles, and the more clearly they've defined the desired outcomes of their work, the better they'll be able to help.

To learn how Thurlow/Associates can help you foster an active, engaged board, contact us for a no-cost consultation. You can reach us at (310) 675-6497 or at hello@thurlowassociates.com.