General Principles for Restoring Your Nonprofit Board

Changing the nature of how a Board works is like changing the nature of a person – it takes clarity, consistency, persistence and time, but it can be done. Fortunately, over the past few decades, we have a learned a great deal about how to successfully change other types of systems, including organizations and Boards. If you are working to restore a struggling Board, then you should work according to the following principles. The upcoming section, "Procedures to Restore Your Board," follows these principles. (These principles come to us from Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline* (Doubleday, 1990), and are applied here in slight variation for use in restoring Boards.)

Structures Determine Behaviors, Which Determine Events

An example of the application of this principle is two Board members, Tom and Sally, who keep arguing with each other. Board members might try to solve the problem simply by telling Tom and Sally not to argue anymore. Other members might try to work with Tom and Sally to make them appreciate each other more, to feel better about each other. Wiser Board members would also consider the structures (roles and policies) in the Board that might be causing Tom and Sally to argue. For example, Tom and Sally might not be clear on what their roles and responsibilities are in the Board. Or, they may have conflicting roles and responsibilities because the Board has no clear work plans. Or, Tom and Sally might be lacking the resources required to effectively carry out their jobs as Board members because they received no orientation or training about their roles. Rarely is the problem simply that Tom and Sally like to argue with each other.

There Is No Blame

When major issues recur in a Board, it usually is the fault of a dysfunctional structure (roles and policies), rather than the fault of the Board members who are struggling to operate within that dysfunctional structure. One of the ways that ineffective nonprofit leaders try to motivate Board members is by using guilt and blame. They remind members that the nonprofit will shut down if members do not raise more money. Then, if the nonprofit continues to have major struggles, leaders blame those Board members even more. Soon the guilt and blame no longer motivate members, at all. Too often, the leaders cannot change their ways and, as a result, the Board members quit the Board. These leaders need to recognize that the problem is not caused by some amazing coincidence that all of the Board members are lazy and inept, but rather by larger problems in the Board itself. For example, members might not have been trained how to participate in fundraising. Or, members might not have confidence in the fundraising plans. Or, the problems might be that there is insufficient strategic and program planning, resulting in ineffective fundraising proposals to funders. (Ineffective planning also is not the fault of nonprofit leaders – they did the best they could with what they had at the time. Now, they should learn from the problems on the Board and investigate if planning could be done better.)

Today's Problems Are Yesterday's Solutions

Many times, nonprofit leaders attempt to get Board members more involved by making the experience of Board membership more pleasurable. For example, they schedule Board meetings to occur less frequently and/or they make Board meetings shorter. Ironically, while this might make Board members more involved in meetings, the nonprofit really is getting less value from Board members because, overall, they are now much less involved than before when meetings were longer and more frequent. Sometimes, to address this new problem, leaders will begin working with only a

few of the more active Board members, with hope to get at least some involvement from at least some of the Board members. So now, the effectiveness of the Board is worse than ever before. Instead, leaders need to be clear to themselves and the Board members about what kind of Board the nonprofit needs and requires. If the nonprofit needs more attendance among Board members, then enact a Board attendance policy that removes members who do not attend.

Easy Way Out Usually Leads Back In

When a few Board members continue to complain that the Board and nonprofit need to do a better job, then other members – usually those who are completely content with the status quo – might blame the few members as being "bad apples" and want those few members to just leave the Board. The more those few members complain, the more that other members blame the complainers. Eventually the Board Chair confronts the complainers, who become even more frustrated and eventually just quit the Board. Then new members come on the Board – often members who have had some Board training so they expect a high-quality Board. Soon the new members start sharing the same complaints, and so they eventually are asked to leave the Board, too. The cycle continues several times until an outside stakeholder, for example, a funder, asserts that the Board needs help.

Faster Is Slower

If Board members do not take the time and energy required to develop and implement Board roles and policies, then they might enjoy the benefit of having fewer Board meetings to work on these matters. However, they will soon realize that they seem to be attending to the same Board problems over and over again – for example, Board members' complaining that discussions never lead to decisions, decisions do not get implemented, only some members participate and some members do not come at all. Hopefully, they will realize that they have to take the time to work smarter, rather than harder. They will identify the causes of these complaints, for example, that agendas are poorly designed, they need a policy for making decisions and they need a Board attendance policy.

Come "From" Them, Not "At" Them

It can be extremely difficult to change a Board merely by preaching at members about how they have to change. For example, it usually does little good to tell frustrated and conflicted Board members that they need to "suck it up" and "do what they are supposed to do." Their performance will just get worse. They will feel more frustration, anger and despair. Rather than coming *at* them with dire warnings, listen *to* their side of the story. Do a quick Board self-evaluation to get each member's feedback about how the Board could be improved.

Behavior Grows Better Before It Grows Worse

Usually, quick fixes to the symptoms – rather than real fixes to the real causes – of a problem will make things better, but only for a while. For example, if Board members have continued conflicts amongst each other, then members might resort to team building. Poorly designed team building might help Board members to temporarily feel better about themselves and each other. But if the team building did not attend to the underlying structures that caused the conflicts in the first place, then team building can actually make things much worse.