

Just One of Tom Little's BIG Ideas



Clearly Define the Board's Role

Boards must know their role if they are to be successful

Clearly define the Board's role (and constraints)

“The single most important element of board management is ensuring that all relevant parties in the organization, from rank and file staff and volunteers, through the management ranks to the board itself, clearly understand who is responsible for what, and how the evaluation of accomplishments is to be carried out.”

So says Vic Murray, Adjunct Professor, School of Administrative Studies, University of Victoria, in *Improving Board Performance*. Murray is another of my favourite sources of information about non-profits. See my *Big Idea #7* on Page 77 for the Internet address of the University of Victoria's *Voluntary Sector Knowledge Network*.

Vic makes defining roles sound easy, but from what I have seen, it is not. This is mainly because non-profit Boards are made up of volunteers, whose time and experience in the sector are often limited.

Couple that with the fact that larger non-profits hire staff working under an Executive Director, who then become the 'doers', and we have a quick recipe for problems related to separating duties, and making the organization work effectively.

The *Non-Profit Sector Leadership Program* of Dalhousie University offers a useful definition: “The role of the Board of Directors is to provide leadership and oversight of the activities of the Association.” It also references self-management as another duty, or what I refer to as ‘Board operation’.

Leadership

The first area for Board leadership is the positioning of the organization: Establishing or adjusting its vision, mission, values or principles, and future direction. Academics, and many Board models, encourage Boards to ‘look outward’, rather than ‘inward’ and on the ‘day-to-day’.

Some Boards are effective at this task, and undertake it on their own with energy and diligence. Others defer to the Executive Director, either because the Executive Director has created a

vision of the future and of the organization's role on her or his own, or through development of a strategic plan spearheaded by the Executive Director.

Either way, Boards provide leadership by being the final decision-makers on both positioning and future direction.

The other major area calling for Board leadership is dealing with crises. While the Executive Director may attend to much of legwork when a major problem occurs, the Board should act as spokesperson for the organization, especially in dealing with the media and other parties involved, such as funders.

Boards also provide leadership related to:

- The work of the Executive Director
- The relationship of the Board with the membership
- The compliance requirements of the organization
- Relationships with other third parties, such as funders and the broader community.

They are also the final arbitrator for issues that arise internally.

Oversight

Non-profit Boards are more likely to understand and exercise the oversight function, especially regarding the work of the Executive Director. Here I would like to add a warning to all Boards: Oversight can easily be taken too far, and become undesirable meddling in the day-to-day operation of the organization. A major challenge for Boards, a challenge I deal with in the next section, is finding the right balance between the duties and actions of the Board, and those of the Executive Director.

Board operation

An additional factor in the discussion of Board roles is that in order to lead and oversee, Boards must attend to various aspects of their own operation. This includes recruitment, by-law and policy development, planning and evaluating.

When I was conducting a training session on Board governance a while ago, I pointed out the range of responsibilities a Board must fulfill. One person, who was new to the Board, commented: *"I thought my only job was to monitor the work of the Executive Director."*

Let me say now: *"No, a Board's only job is not to monitor the Executive Director"*, although that is important. Fortunately, through the magic of planning, monitoring and evaluation, as I will explain shortly, that is probably the easiest task for a Board to manage.

In fact, my advice to Boards is to find a quick, effective method for overseeing the work of the Executive Director, then to turn their attention to everything else on their plates.

I am always surprised when some Boards spend significant amounts of time focusing on the Executive Director. I think it is because it is easy, and they don't realize there are so many other things a Board could, and should, be doing.

Time

All this continues to beg the question of time, and I would suggest to you that time is the most pressing issue facing non-profit Boards. That is why many of my *BIG Ideas* have to do with fulfilling the duties of a Board while making the time commitment manageable.

Evaluation

In *Improving Board Performance*, Murray also notes that those involved in the organization must know how the evaluation of accomplishments will be carried out.

I have already referenced my commitment (some would use stronger words like "obsession") to planning that includes monitoring and evaluation. If you follow my recommendations, everyone connected to the organization will be more than familiar with how evaluation is conducted.

I want to conclude this section by suggesting we adjust the definition of the role of the Board, as developed by the *Non-Profit Sector Leadership Program* of Dalhousie University, to read: *Oversight, leadership and managing Board operations, fulfilled within reasonable time parameters.*