

Dysfunctional Levels in Nonprofit Boards and Organizations

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Article and studies from a Google search on "Dysfunctions in Nonprofit Boards & Organizations" yields 445,000 items in .32 of a second. These items show dysfunctions on charter school boards, church boards, health care boards, trade associations, etc.

Rick Moyers, a well-known nonprofit commentator and nonprofit researcher, concluded:

A decade's worth of research suggests that board performance is at best uneven and at worst highly dysfunctional. ... The experiences of serving on a board -- unless it is high functioning, superbly led, supported by a skilled staff and working in a true partnership with the executive -- is quite the opposite of engaging.

These data and comments can lead one to conclude that all nonprofit boards are dysfunctional. I suggest that nonprofit boards can generate a range of dysfunctional behavioral outcomes, but the staff can muddle through and continue to adequately serve clients.

Mildly Dysfunctional: Board meeting attendance can be a problem, left unattended by the board chair and CEO. Agendas are not completed within the meeting time frame. Strategic planning takes place once a year with little reference to it between annual meeting retreats. Goals are established without measured outcomes.

On the other hand, budgets and finances are reasonably well-handled. Incremental growth each year is modest. Board recruitment takes place largely based on board contacts and friendships, with a few recommendations by the CEO. Most everyone on the board is mildly or fully dedicated to the organization's mission.

Moderately Dysfunctional: All of the above dysfunctions, plus one or more of the following:

- The board chair and/or the CEO receive heightened deference in board discussions.
- Important decisions are made without full participation by all board members. One of two directors sets the tone for the discussions and the outcomes.
- Either the board chair or CEO has inadequate backgrounds to develop a robust board. Nearly all agenda topics center on operational issues.
- The board does not trust the CEO but is unwilling to take action to remove him or her.
- The mission is not clearly defined and "mission creep" can be a problem.

In this instance, the staff can be productive, if some managers are able to isolate staff from the board dysfunctions.

Highly Dysfunctional: Many of the following board behaviors are exhibited:

- The board is divided into unyielding factions, a la the current US congress.
- Board discussions go beyond civil discourse into personal barbs, often disguised as humor.

- Board committees are not functioning properly. Important decisions are often delayed for a year or more.
- Rumors about the board conflicts are reaching funders, and are asking questions about the rumors.
- It is becoming difficult to recruit talented board members or professional personnel.
- The board chair and other directors refuse to acknowledge the problems.

There is little that the staff can do in this situation, except to hope for a funding angel to cover the financial problems that will develop. However, I did observe one organization that recovered from such highly dysfunctional board behaviors and finally succeeded in recruiting more talented board members. It also adopted a new governance format. The change led some directors to resign. (One was insisting that the directors should evaluate individual staff personnel!) However the mistrust between the board and staff, as a result of the dysfunctional board behaviors, continued for decades.

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