Common Types of "Broken" Nonprofit Boards

Nonprofit Board members should work together as a strong team to verify that the nonprofit is effectively and efficiently meeting a certain public need. Here are four types of "broken" governing Boards where members are not effectively doing their job. Perhaps the best way to recognize each type is to listen to what Board members talk about in each type.

Problematic Board: Detached Board

In the detached Board, members might not even remember that they are on the Board. In a detached Board, you might hear members having the following exchanges:

- When the member is called to go to a Board meeting and reminded about the purpose of the meeting, the member responds, "Why are you calling me? I forgot that I was even on that Board."
- When called to attend a meeting, many members often respond, "I'm too busy to attend. I'll try to make the next meeting, though."
- Board members often think to themselves and say to each other, "I've not heard from the Executive Director. Therefore, everything must be fine. Don't worry about it."

Members of a detached Board were often recruited because of the members' stature, not because the nonprofit wanted the members to actually participate on the Board. Many times, the Chief Executive and staff members do not want a governing Board anyway – they want to run things without what they perceive as the necessary evil of dealing with a Board. Strong, charismatic founders often do not want Board members involved in the nonprofit, other than to do fundraising for the founder. As a result, nonprofits in these situations often have detached Boards.

Problematic Board: Servant Board

This is a very common type of Board. Members are very passionate and dedicated. They are there to do whatever is helpful. In their actions, they informally "report" to the Chief Executive, rather than the other way around. Here is how Board members might talk in a servant Board:

- "I'm here to help the Executive Director in any way that I can. All he/she has to do is just ask me and I'll be there."
- "What would you like me to do? Just tell me."
- "I'll agree with ['rubber stamp'] whatever the Chief Executive or Board Chair wants."

That approach works until one of the Board members or the Chief Executive attends a training session about Boards and realizes that his/her Board is not functioning well. It works until a funder realizes that the nonprofit really does not have a governing Board, and demands that the Board members undertake Board development.

Problematic Board: Personalities Board

In this type of Board, the members usually have not done any strategic planning, formal or informal, so they do not know what types of expertise would be useful on the Board. Also, they do not know their governing roles at all, so they have resorted instead to using Board members based on their

personalities. Usually, they seek members who seem "passionate" about the mission, and members who might even come to meetings. Members of these Boards often feel lucky if they get any participation on the Board at all. Here is what members might say:

- "Let's get Jim on our Board. He's such a nice guy!"
- "Let's get Jane on the Board. At least she'll come to meetings."
- "Let's get Jack on the Board. He's got 'deep pockets'."

Problematic Board: Micro-Managing Board

Micro-managing Boards often are in response to a crisis in the nonprofit. Many times, the members were another type of Board before the crises. Now, members are operating in strong fear that another crisis might occur or that they might get sued so they have resorted to exerting strong forms on control. Here is what members might say:

- To the Executive Director, "Give us your to-do list!"
- To other staff members, "How's the Executive Director doing – really?"
- "When did you come to work today? We'd like to get a time report each day."

Although the micro-managing at least gets members involved, it often is to the detriment of their attending to more strategic matters, and so matters regarding the nonprofit's mission, and top-level plans and policies are neglected.

Healthy Board: Strategic Board

In a healthy governing Board, members might be a "working" governing Board where they sometimes do "hands-on" activities, such as fixing the fax; they might be a collective where Board and staff members work together in a seamless team; or they might be a policy governing Board primarily attending to top-level policies and plans. Regardless of the personality of the governing Board, members would always be asking the following types of questions in addition to their other activities:

- "Where's our Strategic Plan? How are we doing in implementing that Plan?"
- "What's the status of each Committee's work plan?"
- "Are we sticking to the agenda, the topics and timing for the topics, in our meeting?"
- "Is this discussion really strategic, or should we delegate the topic for further research? "
- "Are our programs really making an impact? How do we know?"
- "We've got some 'dead wood' on this Board. Are we going to tolerate that?"