



Boards of Management: From Surviving to Thriving

Attracting new, skilled and appropriate members onto Boards

One of the frequent questions asked of the Management Support Unit is how organisations can attract high calibre and diverse members to their Boards. This is indeed a challenge in a crowded market where a myriad of organisations are competing for individuals to join their Boards. However, lateral thinking can be of real value:

- Seek a high profile candidate to serve on the Board or act as Patron. It is important research this area well - both with respect to the particular needs of your organisation and the qualities and qualifications of the person you are targeting. For example, if the primary need of the organisation is to purchase and develop a property, then it makes sense to target somebody with building/property development experience. At the same time, seek a high profile individual who has a particular interest in the work. For example, in a disability service, find out who has a child, sibling, niece or nephew with a similar disability. That shared interest is then more likely to engage the individual with your cause. Such individuals can be lively advocates for the organisation as well as attracting others to work alongside them.
- Many retirees are seeking to become engaged in meaningful activities in their communities. Address service organisations, bowling clubs, retirement seminars, the University of the Third Age...anywhere where you are likely to find individuals with time on their hands and skills to contribute.
- Corporate volunteering is a growing area in which to find people with the capacities you need. Contact organisations in your area and establish programs that enable employees to devote a specific period of time (e.g. one day a month) to work for your organisation. Again, a match between your needs and their skills is important. Remember to acknowledge the organisation in all your promotional material.
- Address groups of senior students (such as social work, welfare studies, communications, accountancy, and marketing) and highlight what they can learn through their participation on Boards. The experience they gain may enhance their career path. Community Colleges may also have access to a wide range of interested individuals.
- Think about the cultural diversity in your community. Perhaps representatives from particular ethnic, cultural or religious groups have never even been invited onto Boards and yet within every sub-community there are skilled and motivated individuals. Address meetings of their organisations and invite them to participate.

- Package invitations to prospective Board members appropriately – think of projects that could be of specific interest to them and entice them to become engaged in an activity that is close to their heart.

Training and Developing Board members

Community service organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of training and development for staff members, but many do not place sufficient emphasis on ensuring that Board members have commensurate opportunities to develop their skills. Properly trained Board members who are clear about their responsibilities are more likely to remain active and engaged.

Strategies to develop these capacities include:

- Ensure there is a systematic orientation and induction program for new members. This should include an understanding of the purpose of the organisation, its structure and projects; funding; responsibilities of the Board and all office bearers; governance policies and operating procedures and the difference between governance and management.
- Encourage mentorship arrangements among Board members. This can assist those members with more experience to support those who are newer to the governance role.
- Ensure the Board conducts a self-evaluation each year. This process can help members to identify their strengths and limitations.
- Ensure there is a systematic training program for Board members developed on the basis of the evaluation. If resources allow, engage an external trainer or enable some Board members to attend an appropriate governance training program or conference to acquire needed skills such as media work or marketing.
- Circulate key articles and other governance resources to Board members on a regular basis.
- Invite a guest speaker with relevant expertise to address Board meetings.

Streamlining Board meetings

Sometimes Board meetings descend into rambling and seemingly endless, unfocused discussions designed to induce terminal boredom. It is therefore essential to ensure that Board meetings are streamlined and that they achieve real outcomes.

Some ways to achieve this objective include:

- Prepare a clear agenda that identifies matters for information and issues for discussion/decision.

- Provide background information in writing so that Board members are properly briefed before they need to engage in discussion and make decisions. Board papers should be available to member at least 4 days before the meeting.
- The Chairperson needs to encourage open debate and the expression of different views. At the same time there is a need to ensure discussion does not stray from the topic, that the key issues are summarised and that a clear decision, with defined actions, is made.
- Ensure decisions are properly documented and then follow through to ensure they are implemented.

Dealing with Conflict

Conflict is inevitable and not something to be avoided. People have different views, diverse experiences and contrary opinions. That is to be celebrated and encouraged. However, guidelines for constructive engagement with conflict are essential.

- Ensure there are clear parameters for appropriate communication. Difference should never descend into personal attacks and it is essential for the Chairperson to keep a rein on the quality of communication.
- Refer those involved to the values which underpin the organisation; these are relevant not only to service delivery but in the conduct of all organisational relationships.
- Help the discussion to focus on positive outcomes that are congruent with the objectives of the organisation.
- Develop a conflict resolution process for the Board, both between Board members and between the Board and staff. Ensure this is followed appropriately.
- If necessary invite an impartial third party to act as a mediator.

References:

1. Cairns, Ben, Harris, Margaret. and Hutchison, Romaine. 2003. *Key Findings on Voluntary Sector Mergers*. Centre for Voluntary Action Research: UK.
<http://www.abs.aston.ac.uk/newweb/research/CVAR/forms/MergerKeyFindings.pdf>
2. MacKay, Karen, 2007, *Community Management*, VCOSS and Victoria Law Foundation, Melbourne.
www.vcooss.org.au/documents/VCOSS%20docs/Sector%20devt-sustainability/FOR_VCOSS%20manuals%20advance%20order%20form.doc