

About the Project

BOARD LEADERSHIP

Purpose

The Board Leadership Project was developed to encourage more active leadership on and by nonprofit boards. We wanted to explore why some boards and individual members step up to take the lead at times of change, and why others do not. How do boards create a culture of leadership, and what prepares board members to play a leadership role?

The intention of this product is to serve as a resource for board members who find themselves in one of the types of transitions or challenges described, and who want to “do the right thing” but do not know what exactly to do.

Methodology

The members of the project designed a research study to identify and describe the practices that nonprofit boards have used to develop, motivate, train, and sustain board leaders. The research strategy was based on the assumption that leadership is most apparent at times of transition or crisis, such as:

- the early stages of organizational development
- transition from a founder/executive director or long-time board chair
- the need to respond to major new initiative from external sources/conditions
- to implement the decisions of an internal planning process

Leadership was operationally defined as the actions, skills and qualities of board members that enable organizations to successfully meet these challenges:

- engaging the mission of the organization
- mobilizing action to further the mission
- helping the organization adapt to changing circumstances
- identifying opportunities for change and growth, and/or creating future leaders

The team then asked a variety of sources, including umbrella organizations, technical assistance providers, funders and academics, to identify New York nonprofits whose boards demonstrated this type of leadership. Out of the fifty organizations recommended, fifteen were selected and interviewed by Governance Matters volunteers. Based on the findings, a series of hypotheses about board leadership were developed. To further test and refine the hypotheses, the project scheduled three focus groups with participating executive directors and board leaders.

Outcomes

A capstone team from New York University then reviewed the case studies and identified those that best exemplified board leadership as it was defined. This team also conducted a literature review to determine gaps in the literature related to this topic. Concurrently, a group of Governance Matters members were convened to discuss their experience with board leadership at times of crisis (particularly during times of leadership succession) and outline effective steps to develop the board culture. Finally, the Board Leadership Project Team took all of the material that had been collected and added their own experiences to produce the final products.

Acknowledgements

The material presented on our website reflects the collective experience of Governance Matters members and New York nonprofits identified as exhibiting exemplary board leadership. Governance Matters gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following individuals and organizations.

Project Funders

Without the generous support of the following funders the project would not have been possible:

New York Community Trust
United Way of New York City
Board Leadership Project Team
Barbara S. Miller, Co-Chair, Writer/Editor; Consultant
Jeanne Bergman, Co-Chair, Consultant
Michael Davidson, Governance Matters Board Chair, Consultant
Anne E. Green, Consultant
Barbara Krasne, Governance Matters Board Vice-Chair, Consultant
Roy Leavitt, Executive Director, Greenwich House
Elizabeth Levi, Consultant, former Deputy Director, Freedom House

Nonprofit Leaders

Note: Individual titles reflect positions held at the time the case study was developed, and may no longer be current.

Brooklyn Children’s Museum Margaret Einhorn, former Board Chair, Paul Gangsei, Board Chair; Carol Enseki, President
Cooke Center for Learning and Development Karen Robards, President, Elsa Roe, Board Member; Michael Termini, Executive Director
Council of Senior Centers and Services - Nancy D. Miller, Board Member, William Dionne, Board Member; Igal Jellinek, Executive Director
Fortune Society - Roland Nicholson, Jr., Board Chair, Gloria Jenkins, President, Interview, David Rothenberg, Founder; JoAnne Page, Executive Director
Good Shepherd Services; Robert H. Niehaus, Board President; Joseph T. McLaughlin, Former Board President; Sr. Paulette LoMonaco, Executive Director
HIPPY, USA. Henry Green, (outgoing) Board Chair, Barbara Herman, Vice Chair and (incoming) Board Chair; Elisabet Eklind, Executive Director, M. Gayle Hart, National Program Director; Susan Cane, Organizational Development Consultant and Professor of Professional Practice, Dr. Mark Lipton Organization and Leadership Development Consultant.
Health Care Chaplaincy - Edee Bjornson, Life Trustee, Lawrence J. Toal, Board Chair; Walter J. Smith, President and CEO, HealthCare Chaplaincy.

JusticeWorks - Ellen Hirsch, Board President, Elizabeth Mayers, Chair, Development Committee; Mary-Elizabeth Fitzgerald, Executive Director.

Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center Louis Jordan, Board Chair, Persis Myers, Board Member; Stephanie Pinder, Executive Director.

Miracle Makers Danne Johnson, former Board Chair, Wylia Sims, Board Chair, Bill Aiken, Board Member; Ann Vanterpool Brown, Executive Director.

New York Asian Women's Center - Kyung Yoon, Board Chair; Tuhina De O'Connor, Executive Director.

Project Reach Youth - Mark Gibbel, Board President; Robert Madison, Executive Director

Sista II Sista Adjoa Jones de Almeida, Staff and Collective Member, Loira Limbal, Staff and Collective Member, Paula X. Rojas, Collective Member.

Streetwise Partners - Matt Gorin, Founding Chairman, Rae Linefsky, Director; Angie Datta, Executive Director.

Visions/Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired Nancy Jones, Board Chair; Nancy D. Miller, Executive Director.

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NYU Capstone Team

Christeen Bernard, Veronica Shipilov,
Holly Thompson, Christine Toes, Alison Yu

Special Thanks to...

Marla Bobowick, Vice President of Products, BoardSource
Howard Levy, Principal, Red Rooster Group, and Alexandra Marchosky for the design and implementation of the Board Leadership section of the website.

Reflections on What is Meant by Leadership on Nonprofit Boards

Since our purpose was not to propose what board leaders should do, we did not impose any particular definition of “leadership.” Instead, we employed an operational definition: board actions that have served to move organizations forward. Our interest was to understand the board processes that made it possible for such leadership to emerge.

Leadership Qualities

Some of the participants in the study did discuss what they meant by “board leadership.” A number of personal qualities of leadership came up repeatedly during discussions. Some of these qualities may seem innate, but many arise from the alchemy of blending the desire to “make a difference,” together with known/learned skills and the opportunity to act. Good leaders exhibit passion, commitment and vision, and they articulate these clearly. They have the ability to communicate with and engage others. They know what they do not know, are willing to take risks, are comfortable seeking outside help, and are honest and forthright in recognizing and naming problems. They are able to support the executive director by making time available to sustain his/her vision and implementation. However, the board’s first loyalty is to the mission and the constituencies the organization serves.

Boards Govern Always, Lead Sometimes

While the basic governance responsibilities of boards of directors are constant, leadership on a good board is more fluid, ebbing and flowing as circumstances and organizational life cycles require. Board leadership is expressed most powerfully and crucially during times of transition and crisis; such periods are also when the absence of leadership is most visible and most devastating to an organization. When things are running smoothly, the more routine governance duties are primary and board leadership is devoted to streamlining systems, strategic planning and increased board fundraising. At such times, the board’s leadership (in the sense of control and direction) may seem more below the surface. This is most often the case when there is a strong, skilled and effective executive director.

Ask Questions!

One of the most important leadership behaviors exhibited by board members is simply to ask questions. A significant outcome of our study is to help guide board members about what questions to ask. In general, these questions fall in the following categories:

1. Compliance

- Are we in compliance with the laws and requirements governing nonprofit organizations?
- Are we in compliance with our commitments to funders, including donors of restricted funds?

2. Strategy

- Are we doing the right things? Why have we chosen to do “x” instead of “y”?
- How are we responding to changing trends that affect our clients and our organization?
- How might internal and external changes affect what we do, and what we should do to prepare for these changes?
- What relationships should we be cultivating outside of the organization?
- What can we do as a board to help position the organization most effectively?

3. Evaluation

- What is the impact of the work we are doing?
- How do our results compare with those of other organizations in our field?
- What does it cost us to provide services? How does that compare with what similar organizations spend?

4. Resources

- How are we allocating our resources? Is this allocation reflective of our priorities?
- What are the resource trends?
- How can we become more attractive to potential sources of funding?
- What role can we as a board play in attracting more resources?
- Are we maximizing our outreach to all potential funding constituencies?

5. Board Structures and Systems

- How are we spending our time as a board?
- Could we be more productive as a whole or in committees?

In some cases, board members will be part of answering these questions. In others, they will rely on the executive director and/or other staff members for the information and input necessary to determine appropriate next steps. Leadership can take the form of raising the questions and listening for responses that make sense.

Leadership from Any Seat

There is a tendency to think of leadership in terms of hierarchy, with the board chair playing the strongest leadership role. It is certainly true that an effective board chair contributes enormously to the board's effectiveness, and a poor board chair can be a significant obstacle to performance. Every board member, however, has a leadership role to play. Any board member can and should raise the kinds of questions described previously. Every board member should have a role to play to move the board's agenda forward and fulfill the board's oversight role. Fundamentally, leadership entails speaking up when you have a concern and contributing what you can to make the organization successful.

Different Leadership Styles

Not all forms of leadership are recognized as such. In fact, often leaders do not recognize their own leadership, or leadership potential. One of the lessons of our study is that people often became leaders because someone they respected called them to leadership. Also, leadership is not the same thing in every culture. One community may admire forceful and outspoken leaders while others esteem a more consensus-oriented approach. Similarly, women may lead differently from men.

Different organizational circumstances call for different leadership styles. At times of upheaval a consensus builder is needed. If real change is needed to move the board forward, a more decisive leadership style is called for. One organization described two types of leaders: Visionaries and Implementers. The first group are the strategic thinkers who have imagination and are focused on "the long haul." The second are those who can figure out what is needed, right now, in order to make something work and who enjoy concrete tasks. They can also help the executive director think through the impact a new undertaking may have on the organization's ability to maintain its regular operations.