

Board Self –Assessment

by Charles Schuetz

The board of a nonprofit organization has a great deal of impact upon the quality and effectiveness of the organization. In a sponsored ministry, the board also has immense impact upon the mission effectiveness and the quality of ministry of the institution. It is, therefore, of great importance that the board periodically reviews its role and develops ways to become a more effective board.

Harry Slesinger, writing for the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, says, “A good board....should ask hard questions about critical issues facing the organization rather than concern itself with administrative detail. It should approve the guidelines and policies of strategic concern rather than debate which photocopier the organization should purchase.” Very busy board people, who are highly motivated to fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities to the institution, need to have the opportunity to assess how well they have been focusing on the “critical issues” rather than on the “photocopiers.”

Some specific benefits of a good self-assessment include:

- Refreshing the board’s understanding of its role and responsibilities with respect to the institution’s nonprofit status and sponsorship;
- Identification of important areas of board operation that need attention or improvement;
- Measuring of progress toward existing plans, goals and objectives;
- Shaping future operations of the board with respect to the long range strategic plan;
- Defining the criteria for an effective and successful board;
- Maintaining and updating the policy book;
- Building of trust, respect, and communication among board members and with the chief executive; and
- Enabling individual board members to work more effectively as part of the team.

It is a good idea to structure a self-assessment to address both Internal Effectiveness and External Effectiveness of the board. The internal effectiveness of the board is primarily concerned with mission effectiveness, quality of ministry and nonprofit fiduciary responsibilities, while the external effectiveness is mainly concerned with the relationship of the board with its constituencies.

When assessing the internal effectiveness of the board, the following elements should be reviewed as a part of the process:

1. The Sponsorship Agreement

- a. Implementation of the Guidelines for Sponsorship
- b. Formation programs in the Comprehensive Mission Orientation Plan (CMOP)

2. The Quality of Ministry

- a. The Long Range Strategic Plan
- b. Financial Stability -The Roadmap to Solvency
- c. Appropriateness of Standing Policies
- d. The Capital Budget Plan
- e. Institutional Advancement Plan
- f. Effectiveness of Standing Committees

On the other hand, the external effectiveness assessment is concerned with the interaction of the board with its various constituencies and the effectiveness of the communications matrix:

1. The Sponsor - the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Boston
2. The “dear neighbors” served: clients, students, parents
3. The external community
4. Administration/Faculty/Staff
5. Alumni

The self-assessment is one of the best tools a board has to help it be effective in governing the institution and for making it possible of individual board members to derive expected satisfaction and fulfillment from board service. As Slesinger also states, a properly conducted self-assessment offers “tangible and intangible benefits to the participating board members and the chief executive, to the organization that they are governing and assisting, and, ultimately, to the people the organization serves.”

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HARRY H. SLESINGER