

Facing the Hard Work of Governing

by Suzanne M. Kearney, Executive Director

As board members in these difficult times, we often ask ourselves, What should we be doing? How do we transform the organization to create sustainability in the face of so many challenges? First, it is unlikely that returning to “business as usual” is a real option. Second, the board is responsible for setting the future direction of the ministry. Therefore, it is the board that must transform itself if it is to transform the ministry. As the board rethinks the organization’s future, it will in turn redefine the board’s job in relation to that future.

Forming a Team

What kind of transformation is needed? The board needs to function like a team whose members share common goals and values: each member understanding her/his role and how that contributes to the performance of the whole; nurturing a climate of mutual trust and support; implementing decisions with commitment; and resolving differences with respect and understanding.

The board as a whole must be fully accountable for its own performance. Each board needs to articulate a clear purpose for itself annually and measurable outcomes that demonstrate the added value provided by the board to the organization - at least commensurate with the resources it consumes.

Undertaking the Transformation

The Chair of the board with the Executive Committee must lead the effort of transforming the board in the process of rethinking the ministry’s future direction. Some rules for the road include the following:

- ◆ Resist accepting the status quo;
- ◆ Address the underlying systemic and structural problems by looking behind the status quo;
- ◆ Establish a habit of inquiry in all board and management discussions;
- ◆ Define the new reality and create the big, simple idea that can subsequently generate a cascade of ideas to achieve results;

- ◆ Manifest positive leadership practices and attitudes by emphasizing what is going right, what is life-giving, uplifting, inspiring in the organization;
- ◆ Communicate the vision always and everywhere; and
- ◆ Stimulate individual ownership of the vision throughout the ministry.

After thoughtful and rigorous deliberation, each board should decide for itself what it should do, how it should do it, and how it is going to govern. Then it must assume responsibility for doing that effectively.

There is no one right way to be a board. Good governance is not an accident; it requires hard work.

Resources

“The New Future of Governance” by Linda C. Crompton, *Board Member*, November/December 2009

“The Big, Selfless, and Simple Leadership Platform” by Rick Smith, *Leader to Leader*, Winter 2010

“Boards as Teams, Parts 1, 2 and 3” by Tim Lannan, resource article on *Charity Channel*, July 2009