

# 1995 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

## ABSTRACT

*Because the board of trustees of an organization works primarily with the executive director, staff members often feel disconnected and even passive about its role. Yet board members can be powerful advocates for organizational change, and it is helpful for staff to develop such advocates at the board level. This is especially true for the volunteer administrator. Board members can serve as models for the high-impact volunteer involvement that is most desirable in an organization. Frequently, however, board members do not see themselves as volunteers or as connected to the organization's volunteer program. Volunteer administrators must first become personally informed about the role of the board and the unique contributions of its members. Volunteer administrators can create advocates at the board level by connecting the board to the volunteer program, seeking spokespersons for the volunteer program at the board level, and by educating the board about the volunteer program thereby elevating the status of all volunteers.*

## Understanding and Influencing the Power People

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The board of trustees of a non-profit organization is a key component of the organization yet frequently the average staff member has little direct connection or communication with the board and often does not understand the role and importance of the board.

First, a board is a legal requirement for all non-profits. In the non-profit world they are referred to as boards of directors or as boards of trustees because they hold the "public trust." They serve as the eyes and ears of the greater community, and are responsible for the financial transactions of the organization.

In an ideal situation, boards provide a connection to the greater community while also serving the organization in partnership with the staff. They provide leadership, objectivity, and credibility (Ellis, 1986). A board is unencumbered by

the daily management of the organization thereby allowing it to focus its attention on the greater issues of long-range planning. Board members give "credibility" through their unpaid status. Paid staff have a vested interest in the affairs of the organization while theoretically the board, as unpaid volunteers, have less of a vested interest in the organization, and are better able to make the types of difficult decisions that may affect staff adversely. The board serves as an objective policy maker, able to focus on the policy issues of the organization without being personally affected by those policies. Board members act for the good of the greater community or public.

### BOARD FUNCTIONS

Boards perform six basic functions. First, they are responsible for the adminis-

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tration of the corporation. They ensure that all legal requirements are met. The board defines the organization's purpose by establishing a clear statement of mission. The board should annually revisit the mission to be certain it is relevant and meaningful in a changing society.

Second, the board is responsible for program planning and budgeting. Every board first must ensure that programs and services are consistent with the organization's mission and are of high quality. Sometimes the board must make decisions about competing interests. It is the role of the board to define the specific needs to be addressed by the organization, to establish priorities of service, and to identify the target population to be served. Staff and board should work cooperatively to develop the programmatic and financial plans. The board approves and adopts the annual plan and the annual budget to support the program plan. The staff is responsible for the efficient, effective, and often creative implementation of the programs, within the budget parameters.

Third, the board is responsible for the ongoing evaluation of organizational effectiveness. The board regularly evaluates the progress and accomplishments of the organization. In doing so the board assesses progress in achieving the mission, responsiveness to new situations, the effectiveness of programs, and the effectiveness of the board's leadership role.

The fourth function of the board is the retention and evaluation of the executive director. The board is responsible for the hiring, supervision, evaluation and, if necessary, firing of the executive director.

The fifth function of the board is the financial stewardship of the organization. The board should assume the lead in the development of financial resources by setting the standards for solicitation and expenditures, and by engaging in long-range financial planning. One way in which board members take a leading role in the development of financial resources is through personal contributions.

Finally, the board serves as the com-

munity connection. The board represents the public interest, and through its connections with the community, gives credibility to the organization and its programs. In like manner, board members represent the organization in the larger community. Often individuals are invited to sit on a board because they represent a particular constituency of importance to the organization.

Brinckerhoff (1994) suggests that an effective board has most, if not all of the following characteristics:

- *It understands the organization's mission, and acts to implement that mission for the benefit of the organization's constituency, consistently and professionally.*
- *It acts as a policy setter and check and balance with the staff.*
- *It works primarily with the executive director and evaluates the executive director at least annually.*
- *It changes over time, filling its membership fully by recruiting new members to meet the changing needs of the organization.*
- *It elects qualified officers, and appoints qualified committee chairs.*
- *It supports the organization in public.*

## THE VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATOR AND THE BOARD

Because the lines of communication with the board pass most directly through the executive director, staff often believe and act as if they have no connection with, or impact upon, the actions of the board. The truth is that staff can play an important role with the board with the approval and direction of the executive director.

The proper lines of communication between staff and the board require staff to always seek approval of the executive director before approaching the board or a specific board member. Board members likewise are not encouraged to make direct contact with staff without prior knowledge and approval of the executive director. This does not mean, however, that staff cannot have official interaction

with the board. The first step for the volunteer administrator is to work with the executive director to highlight the importance and value of having direct interaction with the board by identifying specific areas where s/he can be of "assistance" within the board process.

Frequently staff have opportunities to serve as advisors to the board's committees. Board members are not, and should not be, engaged in the day-to-day operations of the organization. They rely on staff to bring issues of importance to their attention. Volunteer administrators are in a unique position to influence the board, and can often create volunteer program advocates through interaction with board members.

Volunteer administrators can create advocates at the board level by serving as a resource to the nominating committee where they can be actively involved in recruiting and recommending new board members. They can offer to be a part of the orientation for new board members, perhaps even taking a lead in planning it.

Volunteer administrators may find creative ways to remind board members that they, too, are volunteers for the organization. Frequently board members do not perceive themselves as volunteers and, in fact, ignore or devalue the volunteer program. Volunteer administrators must help board members recognize their unique contributions in such ways as to elevate the status and importance of all volunteers.

Board members are the high-level decision makers for the organization, and by their stewardship show that volunteers can and do fulfill critical roles in the life of the organization. They demonstrate that volunteers need not be given secondary or less important functions within an organization. This is a unique opportunity to highlight high-impact volunteer involvement that can create excitement and advocates at the board level.

Volunteer administrators can involve the board in the evaluation of the overall volunteer program by seeking their input

regarding the evaluation criteria. Ask board members what they want to know, and why it is important to them, before developing the evaluation process. As stakeholders seek their input. Provide them with essential quantitative and qualitative information about the volunteer program. Be sure the information provided affects program delivery, and helps accomplish the mission of the organization.

Volunteer administrators can assist and encourage the board to consider the roles of volunteers during board visioning and planning sessions. Work with the executive director to stress the importance of your personal participation in the process emphasizing the need to consider volunteer inclusion and impact in the development as well as implementation phases of the organization. When possible, encourage the active participation of program volunteers. Encourage the executive director and board to seek input from all volunteer program staff, paid and unpaid.

Regularly communicate issues of importance to the board. Volunteer administrators often provide monthly or quarterly reports to the executive director who may or may not pass them on to the board. Volunteer administrators need to be proactive in encouraging the executive director to allow the volunteer program to be more than a monthly report on a piece of paper.

When you obtain access to the board do not report only numbers. Also give anecdotal information that supports the goals of the volunteer program and promotes the mission of the organization. Share current literature or research about volunteerism. These reports call attention to the volunteer program and help the board be an active participant in the program. Another way to call attention to the volunteer program is to formally, through the executive director, seek board approval for volunteer program policies.

Approach the executive director about inviting board members to be a part of community speaking engagements. Volunteer administrators can encourage board members to speak out about their

volunteer involvement. Use quotes and photos of board members in agency reports and newsletters.

Serve as a staff liaison on the board's program committee. This position provides the volunteer administrator with new opportunities to remind the board of the daily role of volunteers in program delivery. Encourage the board to expand its vision of volunteer involvement, and to consider the implications for volunteers and volunteer program management when they discuss program development or expansion. Look for and encourage new ways of engaging volunteers in the work of the organization. Build advocates at the board level.

Finally, become better informed about the unique nature of board work, and the relationship of board members to the volunteer program. Respect the proper lines of communication and work closely with the executive director to define proper and appropriate avenues for interaction with the board.

Volunteer administrators should become familiar with the skills and interests of each board member as they would for other organizational volunteers. Create personnel files and document trainings. Create personalized opportunities

for recognition.

Board members are motivated by the same types of motivations that influence all volunteers: affiliation, achievement, and power (McClelland and Atkinson, 1968). Volunteer administrators are well versed in understanding volunteers and their needs and can be of service to the executive director in this area. Volunteer administrators need to recognize that board members are volunteers first, and policy setters second. By using their knowledge and understanding of the volunteer field, volunteer administrators can produce major dividends for the volunteer program by creating volunteer program advocates at the board level.

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