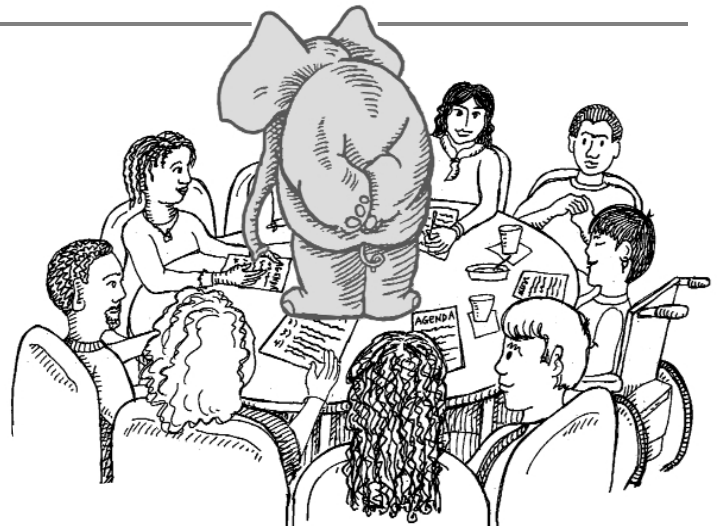


THE ELEPHANT IN THE BOARD ROOM: ROUND ONE



By KIM KLEIN, AMANDA BALLARD and MANAMI KANO

Most people have heard the phrase “the elephant in the living room” to refer to a giant problem that no one is talking about. We who work in the nonprofit sector have a number of elephants, but the biggest one in the herd is the board, followed closely by the many efforts to fix the board. We act as though a little restructuring here and a little training there will fix up a board so that it’s productive and functioning smoothly again. But we also know deep down that this is not the case. It is time to name this elephant and to bring into the open a real process for finding out how boards could actually work.

Here at the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal* and a sister organization, the Building Movement Project, we have been on a search for a model or models of board functioning that would actually work for the non-traditional organizations that comprise our constituency. With funding from the Brainerd Foundation, we conducted an intensive literature review and an in-depth examination of some organizations that have tried alternatives to the various traditional board models. We have led a few workshops, held a number of phone interviews, and had dozens of informal conversations with board members, development directors, executive directors, consultants, funders, volunteers, and academics about the topic of board functioning.

Our focus is on organizations with budgets of less than \$2,000,000, with boards that are self-selected or elected, and with missions that focus on issues of social change, social justice, advocacy, or the environment. These broad categories often include organizations devoted to arts and culture, community organizing, social service, and public interest law, as well as think tanks, and so on. We are most interested in organizations that care about diversity on the board and staff and that seriously want to be institutions, not just the vision or hobby of one or two people.

The organizations we work with must raise money every year. They generally do not have endowments, and they are not so famous as to be able to expect their annual

operating budgets to appear without significant effort. Their board members are, with a few exceptions, not wealthy, and fundraising is a struggle. Any new suggestions must include board involvement in fundraising in a significant way without changing a commitment to economic diversity.

With this paper, we want to share what we have learned so far and suggest some new ways of thinking about boards. Even more important, we want to initiate a dialogue in order to examine this elephant: What does it look like? How did it get this way? How can we begin to solve the problem the elephant represents? We hope you will share your own thoughts on this topic and your experience in trying new things: What has worked, what hasn’t? Do you think what we are suggesting might or might not work, or how could it be improved?

Consider what follows “round one” of this discussion.

THE PROBLEM, THE PREMISES, THE QUESTION

We start by identifying the problem as we see it, followed by two premises that must underlie any attempts to “fix” board functioning. Then we articulate the main question that needs to be answered.

The Problem: By law, nonprofits must be governed by a board of directors. However, most boards do not function well.

Background: When nonprofit law was created in the 1950s, the model of a board comprised of volunteers who had abundant time to carry out the work made sense: there were only 30,000 nonprofits, which translated into about 510,000 board slots (assuming an average board size of 17 members). At that time, what we think of as the standard model of board functioning also made sense: volunteers gave their time to supervise paid professionals; assumed legal, moral and fiscal responsibility for the organization; engaged in fundraising, created policy, and evaluated programs. Board members ideally did all this while maintaining harmonious relationships with staff.

Moreover, this same group of people was expected to recruit new board members who moved into the work seamlessly, and all this happened year in and year out. While this structure might have worked then, today its success as a model seems about as likely as being struck twice by lightning.

Fifty years and counting after the law was created, things are vastly different: there are 1.5 million nonprofits; they need about 25.5 million people to fill their board seats. Economic times have changed: whereas previously many people, mostly women, had time to volunteer on boards, today more women are working full time and both men and women are often working more than one job. Volunteer time for board participation has diminished even as the need for it has increased.

A major corollary of this shift in people-power is that those who do join boards often don't learn all they need to fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. They learn on the job, they learn badly or only part of what they are expected to do — and both board and staff end up frustrated.

Premise #1: To be effective and able to roll with the winds of change; to remain fully mission-driven, with a diversity of staff, volunteers and funding yielding enough money and time to do the work; to really be about the business of making their communities better places to live — to accomplish all this, nonprofit organizations need strong boards.

Premise #2: Staff and board members must have a strong commitment to the mission of the organization. This commitment implies a clear understanding of the work of the organization and an ability to articulate that understanding to friends, colleagues, donors, funders and the general public.

The Question: What kind of model or models of board functioning will work — that is, enable these two premises to be fulfilled — for the kinds of organizations we are most concerned with?

OLD SOLUTIONS

A small industry of consultants (including those associated with the *Grassroots Fundraising Journal*) has arisen to try to help organizations answer this question. There are literally thousands of articles, dozens of web sites, and hundreds of books and videos with prescriptive solutions to the problems boards face.

Responding to the first premise, many consultants, practitioners, and academics have come up with a variety of structures to try to improve how boards operate. Each of these structures has useful features. Nonetheless, new problems keep cropping up. We are no sooner done with advising one organization than a dozen more are on the horizon needing help. So, while we have been working around the

elephant, we may have merely created new paths for her to lumber along until she reaches yet another dead end.

NEW DIAGNOSIS: FOCUS ON PROCESS, NOT STRUCTURE

There is in fact no *structural* solution to this problem. Many boards work for some period of time — the chair is good, the ED works well with the board, the committees click. Every structure works for a while, and then doesn't seem to work any longer. Some new structure is needed to kick-start the board into better functioning.

What we need is to analyze, document and develop the *process* by which an organization would choose one structure over another at any given time, and the process by which they would move on to a new structure when the old one no longer works. In this new approach, all structures would be temporary and permeable, more like tents than buildings.

The solution to the problems of boards is, in other words, a *process* solution. Instead of subscribing to the paradigm, “We restructured and now we don't need to do that,” we would instead use the notion, “We have figured out how to continually create ourselves so that we are operating from our individual and collective strengths, which are constantly evolving.”

The process we are looking for has these characteristics:

- Simple to use
- Easy to understand
- Replicable
- Inexpensive to implement
- Will produce fairly immediate payoff to maintain motivation
- Able to cross class, race and age lines
- Applicable to a range of issues (environment, social service, organizing, arts, etc.)
- Useful for national as well as local groups
- Able to make a measurable difference in six months
- Flexible

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature about boards comes in two broad types: prescriptive and academic. The prescriptive literature is what Grassroots Fundraising, CompassPoint, Board-Source, and many writers and consultants have created. Although our experience has shown us that this literature is helpful, and although we continue to produce it, we know it only goes so far.

Prescriptive literature instructs boards on how to be effective, usually recommending that they use certain structures, get a lot of training, do proper recruitment, run

their meetings in interesting ways, and so on. Academic literature, on the other hand, proposes large theoretical changes or analyzes the problem. Most academic literature suggests solutions tentatively; the writers are clear that their suggestions have not been tried. Academics and practitioners rarely seem to talk with each other, and it seems from the literature that practitioners rarely translate the suggestions developed from academic research into prescriptive actions. Most rare was literature of either kind that spoke specifically to our types of organizations.

Even so, much of what we read was thought-provoking and helpful. You can download an annotated bibliography at www.buildingmovement.org/artman/publish/resources.shtml.

Two books were of particular help in creating the suggestions contained in this essay: *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards*, by Richard P. Chait, William P. Ryan, and Barbara Taylor (BoardSource, 2005), and *The Structure of Women's Nonprofit Organizations*, by Rebecca L. Bordt (Indiana University Press, 1997). Also useful was an unpublished paper by Pat Bradshaw and others called "Nonprofit Governance Models: Problems and Prospects" (summarized at bsbpa.umkc.edu/mwcnl/research/renz/boards_and_governance.htm).

In *Governance as Leadership*, the authors suggest that boards think and govern more as leaders than as managers; that in addition to fiduciary and strategic governance, and beyond offering advice, expertise, and fundraising, boards also engage in what the authors call "generative leadership." Rebecca Bordt looks at women's organizations in New York City founded between 1968 and 1988 to document how ideas about organizational structure have changed. She finds that "Women today are creating hybrid forms of organization that combine, in innovative ways, the best characteristics of both" bureaucracies and collectives. Pat Bradshaw and her colleagues note that there is no "one best way" of nonprofit governance. They examine existing models and encourage innovation and creativity in creating new models that are hybrids of existing and emerging models.

KEY LEARNINGS

Two key points emerge from both the literature review and our interviews with organizations that have tried various alternative models. The first is that there is no one fixed solution to the problem; as noted above in our new diagnosis, organizations are not only going to have to find what works for them, they must also — and this is the critical feature — anticipate how they will need to change models as their circumstances change.

The second key point is that even though there is no

one way, there are five things that all workable processes and models have in common:

- As mentioned earlier, ***a commitment to and clear understanding of mission.***

- ***A process for surfacing and dealing with disagreement in a principled way.*** By principled, we mean people feel free to express their opinions and are open to hearing the opinions of others. Too often, the executive director, board chair, or even individual board members equate disagreement with disrespect and questions with criticism or lack of confidence in organizational leadership. Boards whose membership crosses cultural lines may have someone who is comfortable interrupting or talking loudly right next to someone who finds those behaviors intimidating or rude. Different cultures ascribe different meanings to the same words; "I'll try to do that" can mean anything along the spectrum from "I will do everything I can to get that done" to "No way am I even going to start on that." Boards that include people whose first language is not English (or the dominant language of the board), can have misunderstandings from the way things are translated.

- ***Leaders, especially at the executive director and board chair level, who want to create a working team.*** The best leaders are those who genuinely like working with people and are willing to spend time on this process. Our interviews and workshops revealed control issues in which there is a refusal to share or delegate power or a desire to be the main person associated with the organization. We were told by two different board chairs, "I don't like meetings." An executive director said, "I founded this organization; it is mine, and I should have the most say about what happens." While people like this may be gifted, they are not suitable candidates for the jobs they have.

- ***A culture of both accountability and forgiveness.*** When someone says they will do something and they don't, it should not be ignored, but neither should it be used as the last word about this person. Too often, we find that an executive director equates failure by a board member to keep one commitment as an inability to keep any commitment. Similarly, staff and consultants will mistake board members' doubt and uncertainty about their ability to raise money as a refusal to be part of the process of fundraising. Over time, a culture develops in which failure to follow through on the part of the board and "I'll do it myself" on the part of the director become the norm.

- ***Training and education.*** People cannot be expected to know their job if it is not explained to them, often several times and in several ways. This element of successful board functioning is already well developed and much exists in the prescriptive literature.

NEW WAYS TO LOOK AT PROBLEMS

Now let's look at three common organizational issues and how they might be solved using both the new diagnosis and the principles just enumerated.

PROBLEM 1: No One Wants to Chair the Board

To solve this common problem, we try to figure out its component parts and address each part, rather than following the usual route, which is to browbeat someone into reluctantly taking on the role. The first step is to ask each board member what exactly they don't want to be or do when they say they don't want to be the chair and to push each person for a deeper explanation until we have a very specific list. For example, if someone says, "I don't have the time," we ask, "Time for what? What are you going to be asked to do as the chair that you are not asked to do now?" The list we develop will have some or all of the following reasons for not wanting to be board chair: don't like to run meetings, don't know how to read a balance sheet, schedule is too chaotic to show up for every meeting, not good at dealing with disagreement, don't understand exactly what the chair does. Using this list, one or more of the following things could happen:

- *One person could realize that she thought the role of the chair had far more responsibility than it does, and that she can make a commitment to be the chair.* If everyone agrees she would be a good chair, the problem is solved without changing the structure of the board at all.

- *People could divide up tasks, which is a common structure now.* One person designs the agenda and runs the meetings; another is in charge of all other tasks.

- *The entire board could realize that they need some training.* Maybe no one knows how to read a balance sheet, or maybe everyone would like a training in conflict resolution.

- *The group could decide that the position of chair will rotate, with each person holding the job for some short period of time,* such as two months, or four meetings, or through a hiring or a capital campaign.

There are other reasons that people might not want to be the chair, such as board members are intimidated by the executive director; several people on the board actively dislike each other; the organization is going through a scandal or a difficult transition. They are too complicated to deal with here but would make interesting case studies.

PROBLEM 2: Executive Director Feels that the Board Micromanages

Overinvolvement at too detailed a level is one of the most common complaints executive directors have about active boards. Sometimes this tension can be resolved by a

detailed clarifying of roles and responsibilities. In younger grassroots organizations, board members pitch in and do what needs to get done — often without a lot of thought as to whether it is their job. As the organization grows, board members may keep doing that, without realizing that their work begins to interfere with that of the staff.

Sometimes, however, there is a fundamental disagreement about roles. Perhaps the ED does not want the board to be engaged, except in fundraising. Chait and others point out that such an ED attempts to keep the board at such a great distance from day-to-day operations that they actually have little idea about what is going on. In such a situation the board's governing role can fade and the staff-board relationship easily become adversarial.

To solve this problem will require a more in-depth examination. Too often organizations in this situation look only at the role of the board. A new approach would also look at the role of the executive director: What would it take for the ED to welcome the work of the board? What work would be both useful and in keeping with the board's mandate? What does the ED actually need and what does the board need from the ED to work as team members all playing on the same side? What new roles might the board look to develop, such as Chait's "generative leadership"?

Micromanaging lends itself to an easy solution: stop it. But moving right to a solution will obscure the real issues, so in this problem, the goal would be to stay in a questioning, not-doing mode for a while to make sure that all the right questions had finally surfaced.

PROBLEM 3: Meetings Are Boring

The traditional meeting format is soporific. A series of reports, some requiring discussion and some decisions, follow one after the other. Motions are made and passed. A board member's only hope is that one of their colleagues has an entertaining presenting style or that the meeting is so well run that it doesn't last long.

Using a new model, the people designing the agenda might use different training and teaching techniques at each meeting or for each topic. For each item we would ask, "What do we want from this item?" More understanding? More engagement? Better follow-through? Volunteering for tasks? Final or interim decisions?

Moreover, we might ask, how can this agenda item come to life so that the board can put its best thinking on it? Perhaps one item would be done as a skit, some as role plays, some in the whole group, some in smaller groups. Board members might be asked to draw or to take a few minutes to write something, then pass it to the next person. Rather than being over quickly, the sign of a good meeting could be that people leave reluctantly, the way they would a great lecture or a stimulating dinner party.

The New Models

A number of new models of organizational behavior are being described as both practitioners and theorists grapple with the problem of boards. Dee Hock, the former CEO of VISA, coined the term *chaord* to describe an organization that runs on a synthesis of the best elements of chaos and order, while being dominated by neither. The concept of chaord has spawned a small industry itself: enter the word into a search engine and read some of what comes up. For our purposes, the notion of chaord — of “adapting organizations to their environment from the inside out,” as one web page puts it — came close to describing the process we were looking for: flexible, creative, able to change quickly, fun, with ownership shared by the whole group, tasks divided over the group, and members of the group able to do each other’s tasks, lots of communication, and powered by a deep commitment to values. (A familiar metaphor that captures some of the same elements is “team.”)

Pat Bradshaw and colleagues looked at a number of organizational models, including chaord, and developed a hybrid they called an “emergent cellular” model. While, as she admits, the model “is so new and is currently not well developed either theoretically or in practice,” it is nonetheless an interesting one to consider. Here is how Bradshaw describes it:

The emergent cellular model is characterized by distributed networks and continuous and organic innovation.... Cellular organizations are made up of cells (self-managing teams, autonomous business units, operational partners, etc.) that can operate alone but that can also interact with other cells to produce a more potent and competent organizational mechanism. It is this combination of independence and interdependence that allows the cellular organizational form to generate and share the know-how that produces continuous innovation.

Bradshaw noted one organization that had committed itself to this emergent cellular model of governance — the then newly created Canadian Health Network (CHN). CHN’s job is to provide reliable, easy-to-access, Internet-based health information to Canadians. CHN was itself a network of at least 500 health organizations throughout Canada, so trying this new model with them allowed a number of ideas to be tested. CHN renamed the model “organic mobilization” and described it this way:

Organic mobilization is based on the metaphor of healthy non-cancerous cells in the human body. Healthy cells grow, replicate and ultimately die. In contrast, cancerous cells cannot die and are characterized by unbridled growth. Similarly, healthy cells can commune with other cells around them and they have tumor-suppressing genes.

Our proposal is to use these concepts of chaord, team, emergent cellular model, and organic mobilization to create discussion about new board models. We hope that some organizations will be willing to try these concepts on and report as they develop some real experience with them.

As you can see, the process model is not applied in the same way for each problem. For some problems, we look for very practical, but out-of-the-box solutions. For other problems, we seek to surface all the questions and know that a solution proposed too early will simply cut off important analysis. For still other problems, we look for all kinds of ways to engage people, knowing that adults have myriad learning styles and that if we are going to take advantage of all the people in the room, we have to have something for each of them. (We intend to gather and publish more case studies as we go along.)

CONCLUSION OF ROUND ONE

Boards are the mainstay of nonprofit organizations, but as currently configured and structured, they are not doing the job they must do. One way to approach how boards might function more effectively is through a radical rethinking away from the notion of searching for the one fixed structure that will work and toward a more fluid understanding of the variety of ways in which boards can carry out their work. New understandings about what makes boards work and new models propose that boards remain flexible, engaging a variety of people in a variety of structures that change as needs change. Fluidity is the main characteristic of these new models. “How can we best do what we need to do now?” becomes the operational question.

YOUR TURN: ROUND TWO

We very much want your feedback, your experience and your questions. Perhaps you have a thorny organizational issue, and you would like to see what a process solution might look like. Perhaps we have not been clear enough in some of our points: Please feel free to ask specific questions. Perhaps you think there is a whole other way of thinking about governance: Please propose it.

The goal of this project is to generate discussion and to continually revise our thoughts every two or three months to reflect new thinking, or to compile opposing thoughts in a “Point, Counterpoint” fashion. In other words, just as with the board functioning, it is our goal to discover. Please join us in this organic process. The outcome is bound to strengthen us all. **GFJ**

KIM KLEIN IS THE PUBLISHER OF THE *GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING JOURNAL*.

MANAMI KANO IS A FUNDRAISING AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONSULTANT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE NONPROFITS.

AMANDA BALLARD IS AN OPERATIONS SUPPORT COACH SUPPORTING PRINCIPALS IN THE OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT.

READERS RESPOND:

letters about “The Elephant in the Board Room”

The focus on your article is on boards, but no board can function well when the executive director doesn't want or allow it to happen. I have been on several boards and have done my best to be a good board member. I give generously, I participate in fundraising, I ask questions. The executive director is happy with the first two and angry or defensive with the questions. I believe the problem is in staff structure and hope you might focus some of your considerable intellect on that. As I live in a very small town and am known in that town, I would ask you to withhold my name if you print this letter.

— NAME WITHHELD

I don't care what you do to make board meetings more entertaining or put in place models to play to people's strengths, nothing will change in most organizations because the people don't want change — neither the staff nor the board. Your assumption that if people could see something to change to, they would do it, is false. Believe me, I have tried over and over as both an executive director and a board member. You have heard the saying, “Power corrupts,” but I believe “Organizations corrupt.” I am now on my own and do what I can by myself.

— FELIX GONZALES, DALLAS, TX

I have recently been hired as the director of the East River Apprenticeshop. We are a not-for-profit that uses boat building and seamanship to affect the lives of New York City youth. “The Elephant in The Boardroom, Round One” speaks directly to my situation.

We were started through the efforts of a man named Lance Lee and folk musician Pete Seeger. There was great momentum at the beginning of the project, but due to the director leaving, fundraising in NYC post-9/11, and the board sickness your article spoke of, the organization was reduced to life support through the efforts of two dedicated men. Our first order of business now is a planning session to redefine the organization, make some new decisions on how we want to proceed, and decide what we want the new board to look like. Needless to say, I was excited to find your organization and article.

Your ideas make complete sense to me and I intend to have my two faithful board members read this article. Perhaps we can start a dialogue as I begin to put your theories into practice.

Thank you for meeting a need on my end. I hope we can contribute to your work.

— CHRIS OCKLER, DIRECTOR, THE EAST RIVER APPRENTICESHOP

What would the world look like if we had, as Kim Klein, Manami Kano, and Amanda Ballard suggest in “The Elephant in the Board Room: Round One” (March/April 2006), boards continually creating themselves so that they are operating from their “individual and collective strengths, which are constantly evolving” and finding out “what works for them” and “anticipating how they will need to change models as their circumstances change”?

May I suggest that the world would look exactly as it does today. Far from ushering in a “brave new world,” Klein, Kano, and Ballard’s prescription of “chaordic” and “organic” forms of governance just reinforces what we already have. Basing your approach to governance on the ever-changing skills and preferences of today’s board members and what they feel works for them and their responses to the ever-changing circumstances in which their organizations exist is precisely what traditional boards do today and precisely what is wrong with boards today.

Here’s another vision: How about board members recognizing that the job of governing should not be defined by what’s comfortable, engaging, and satisfying for them? How about board members recognizing that the job of governing should not be defined by their personal skills and preferences at all? How about board members seeing that leadership should not be defined as responding to “ever-changing circumstances”?

How about board members recognizing that to do the job of governing well they need to, as John Carver has suggested, transcend themselves to a level where they can act as true servant-leaders of those legal and moral owners who hold their organization’s mission most dear? How about taking a closer look at John Carver’s immense body of work as a basis for the new kind of boards we really need — principled leaders empowering people to change the world.

— **CAROLINE OLIVER, MEMBER, INTERNATIONAL POLICY GOVERNANCE ASSOCIATION AND
PRESIDENT, CAROLINE OLIVER COMMUNICATIONS, ONTARIO, CANADA**

THE ELEPHANT IN THE BOARD ROOM: ROUND TWO



KIM KLEIN

The previous pages in this issue have carried responses to the article in the March/April issue of the *Journal* called “The Elephant in the Board Room: Round One.” In this article, I respond to readers who pointed out that in addition to focusing on board functioning, as that article did in looking at the problems of nonprofit boards, there has to be equal focus on the staff. We have written very little in the *Journal* about the skills needed to staff a board and in particular the relationship of the executive director to the board. A quick search on the Internet pulled up a lot of information, but as with information about boards, what’s there is mostly geared to large organizations.

At the *Journal* we are concerned mainly with smaller organizations — those that have fewer than three staff people (and often only one) and where the line between staff and board is permeable — that is, many of the tasks that in a larger organization might be done by staff are, by necessity, taken on by board members. In the absence of a full literature search on this topic, I want to use my experience to shed some light on the roles of staff and board.

WHAT ARE THEY SAYING ABOUT EACH OTHER?

For the past several years I have occasionally done workshops in which representatives from many organizations come together for two or three days, then return a few months later for the same period of time. In those settings, one can go much deeper into planning, organizational development, role playing and processing than in one-day workshops, which must be focused more on information sharing. Organizations are encouraged to send three people to these trainings, including at least one board member.

During one afternoon of the training, the participants divide up according to their roles — board members and volunteers in one corner of the room, executive directors in another, and development directors (and other staff) in

another. Each group focuses on a common question; at the end, each group reports their answers to the whole.

This is the question: *What do you most want the people in other roles to keep in mind about your role in the organization?* In other words, if you are a board member, what do you most wish the executive director would think about when asking you to do something or responding to something you have asked?

Separating people into their roles allows them to be more candid than they may have felt in the full group, and they are able to validate and support one another’s experience. The exercise has been rated highly by everyone every time.

Interestingly, the answers are not predictable. Here is a synthesis of the most common comments from five experiences with this exercise.

Typical Board Member Responses

“I will do what I say I will do. Just give me time to do it.”

“I am very committed to this organization and want to know as much as I can about it. But I can’t always remember or even understand everything you send me to read or that I learn in a meeting, so I need to have things repeated, often several times.”

“When I bring friends to events or ask them to give money, I really want them to have a good experience. I want them to be thanked promptly and put on the newsletter list, and I don’t want to be embarrassed later. I don’t think you always take into account how much I am loaning my credibility to the organization when I ask friends and colleagues to support it.”

Typical Executive Director Responses

“I am pulled in a million directions at once and I can’t always make you a priority.”

“I send materials for you to read ahead of meetings

because I get tired of saying the same thing over and over, and when you ask me to repeat things I feel like you haven't been paying attention." "It is more helpful if you ask me what you can do to help the organization rather than offering advice (even good solid advice)."

Typical Development Staff Responses

"It is hard to do my work when the executive director does not actively support me at board meetings or does not let me contact board members without having to ask for permission."

"I am often asked to do things that are tangentially related to my job but that keep me from doing my work (such as creating cash flow projections or writing and sending out press releases or board minutes). Then people are upset when money isn't flowing in the way they imagine it should."

"I often lie awake at night worrying about our money situation, and I don't want to do that anymore."

Notice that the board members did not say anything like, "Between my job and my family, I don't have very much time to put into this organization."

WHAT WAS NOT SAID

Now, let's look at what was not said. Notice that the board members did not say anything like, "Between my job and my family, I don't have very much time to put into this organization." The executive directors did not say anything like, "You should just trust me and stop asking questions." And the development directors did not say anything like, "I could do everything more easily myself if I weren't answerable to the executive director or the board."

Of course, some board members do complain that they don't have the time to do all their board tasks, and some executive directors do complain that board members don't trust them, and many development people do wish they had an entirely different board or no board at all. That kind of profound organizational dysfunction is beyond the scope of this article.

What this exercise has shown over and over is that there is some serious miscommunication across roles in organizations and a concomitant misreading of motives and desires.

That insight raises a new question: If we take basically reasonable people in three different roles, how can we get them to work together and understand each other?

Because this is a fundraising magazine, I will focus here on fundraising, but I hope you can apply some of what is said here to other aspects of your organization.

A great way to get board members involved is to ask them to teach each other something.

SIX TIPS FOR STAFF

Based on the information that came out of the exercise described here, I offer six tips aimed primarily at executive directors or sole staff people to improve communications among executive directors, development directors, and board members around fundraising. I suggest you put these tips into practice this fall and see how your fall fundraising improves.

1. Be very specific in what you want board and volunteers to do. Board time is different from staff time. A board member volunteers to do something at a board meeting on a Wednesday night. In his or her mind, the task will get done in the next two weeks. If you need it done by Thursday afternoon, then you need to say that. What I see happening repeatedly is that the staff person waits a week and when the task isn't completed, begins to get concerned. Perhaps you send an e-mail reminder, but lacking confidence that the task will be accomplished, you do it yourself. How does the board member feel? Undermined. He or she intended to do what they said — they just didn't intend to do it on your (unspecified) timeline.

Create a culture in your organization — among your staff, board, and volunteers — that no task description is complete without a clear deadline. The chair of the board can learn to ask, "When does that need to be done?" The minute taker can learn to say, "What day shall I note this is due?" It doesn't (and shouldn't) always come from you, the staff person.

This tip is not just about deadlines — it is also about the content of the task. "Check out how Max feels about our last action and let me know" is not helpful if what you want to know is, "Is Max so mad at us for the last action that he won't give anymore, and if so, what can I do to repair that relationship?"

2. Remember that, while you may live and breathe this work every day, your board members generally do not. You were hired because you have experience and possibly even a degree in the issue the organization addresses and some or a lot of skill running a nonprofit. The board members come with some expertise of various kinds, but for many of them, neither the issue nor running a nonprofit is their main work. As with a foreign language, they will forget words and phrases between meetings.

If a significant number of board members have trouble remembering or understanding issues, it is a sign that those issues are not being explained properly. The board is a great focus group for messaging.

A great way to get board members involved is to ask them to teach each other something. For example, let's

New Help for an Old Task

say you are doing a six-week major donor campaign this fall (and let's also say that if you are not doing some kind of major donor campaign this fall, you need to rethink your fall fundraising plans). Ask someone from the board to explain the gift range chart to the rest of the board, and ask someone else to go through the packet of materials being prepared for major donors, and ask a third person to talk to the board about how to identify prospects. Prep them ahead of time and watch them work. There is nothing like teaching something to learn it.

3. Don't talk anyone into doing anything. It doesn't matter that Becky would be the best leader for the fall fundraiser. She is swamped with her new job, doesn't want to do it, and needs to be given another task. You know you could talk her into it, but what you don't take into account is that she won't do a good job, and then you and she will both feel bad. People should accept invitations to do certain kinds of work with enthusiasm, possibly mixed with nervousness.

If you cannot find anyone on your board to do a task, you need to go back to the drawing board and either break the task down further into smaller and more manageable tasks or plan something else. In some cases, you may need to ask for help outside of the board (see box below).

4. Do an audit of your development infrastructure. Do thank you notes go out within 48 hours of receipt of the gift? Are they personalized? Do you create new thank you note language every two months so that a donor never gets the same thank you note twice?

Does your database work well? Is it kept up to date? Do at least three people know how to use it?

Is your website kept very current, and do stories on your site tie in with your paper newsletter?

Do your newsletters go out on time?

Would you reasonably expect that your donors could easily know what your organization is up to in any given quarter?

Survey your board with an e-mail asking: What is good about the development function? What needs to be improved? Do they have any complaints — small or large? Do they have any requests — small or large?

Suppose you discover or finally acknowledge that your newsletter never goes out on time, or that your fall appeal became your spring appeal because you got so far behind in the fall? This is not some shortcoming of yours — this is an organizational problem when everyone (and there aren't enough of everyone) has too much to do. What does the board and the rest of the staff want to do about this? What are the priorities?

How can you build rest into their schedules of board work so that you create a board culture in which the reward for doing your work is time off rather than more work?

work with an organization that has held a successful "Old Movie" Festival for five years. They rent a theater, sell tickets, and show classic movies. It is simple and easy, and they net about \$10,000 over three nights. This year, no one on the board wanted to chair this event. Some of them have gone to the show every year and no longer enjoy it, two others don't like old movies, and the remaining two board members will be out of town. The executive director heeds my advice not to talk someone into managing this event and instead notes in his next e-newsletter that the movie night needs a chair and committee. From out of blue virtual space comes just the help needed! Now the movie night is being run by people who are not on the board but who love the organization and this event. The executive director realizes that not only does he have an event committee, but on that committee are some possible board members. What if no one had wanted to do the event? Then it wouldn't have happened! The organization would have had to raise \$10,000 some other way. Far better than talking a board member into doing it, only to have her do a terrible job and have everyone wind up frustrated.

Set out an order in which you will take care of any problems you have. Be willing to dip into savings if you have them or to borrow money if you don't. Poor equipment, inadequate databases or a poorly managed or nonexistent web presence cost far more to put up with than to fix.

5. Meet with your development director if you have one and review the board's capabilities. For each board member, ask: What are their strengths? What fundraising tasks make sense for them to do? Are there any board members whom the board chair should encourage either to step up or to step off the board?

Who are the most reliable people on your board and what should they be asked to do this fall? How can you build rest into their schedules of board work so that you create a board culture in which the reward for doing your work is time off rather than more work?

Are there other people who are not on the board whom you or the development director should be inviting to help with fundraising? How can you spread the fundraising tasks out? What do you need to do to create a culture in your organization in which having a lot of people working on fundraising is as important as getting the fundraising tasks done? (In fact, that is how enough fundraising will happen.)

6. Meet with the development director for ten to fifteen minutes every day, in addition to any regular meetings you may have. Use these daily check-ins to help your development director stay on task, and find out during these brief meetings what may have taken her off task. Development is a job of huge responsibility and little authority, and people can easily burn out if they don't have a lot of support. However "a lot of support" does not have to mean a lot of time — instead, frequent check-ins to trouble shoot, encourage, and keep current on progress are better than long meetings once a week.

MOVING TOWARD MISSION

As you can see, there are a number of changes executive directors can implement fairly easily that will help build the morale of the team and address the concerns that tend to surface from team members in each of their roles.

The example you set — focused attention, specific requests, spending the money required to solve problems that money can solve — will come back to you in the form of work done, people offering to help out rather than offering advice, and ultimately a feeling of everyone pulling in the same direction — the direction of mission. **GFJ**

KIM KLEIN IS THE CO-FOUNDER OF THE *GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING JOURNAL* AND THE AUTHOR OF NUMEROUS BOOKS, INCLUDING THE CLASSIC, *FUNDRAISING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE*, FIFTH EDITION FORTHCOMING IN OCTOBER 2006.

more views *of the* ELEPHANT



BY STEPHANIE ROTH

In the March/April (2006) issue of the *Journal*, the article, “The Elephant in the Board Room: Round One,” looked at the functioning of boards of small nonprofit organization (budgets of less than \$2 million). We identified the problem that by law, nonprofits must be governed by a board of directors, but that most boards do not function well, to the frustration of both board members and staff. We explored some current thinking about the management and governance responsibilities of boards, suggested some new ways that boards might function more effectively, and invited reader response. The reflections in this article from *Journal* editor Stephanie Roth are followed by letters on the topic from some readers and a follow-up article by Kim Klein, “The Elephant in the Board Room: Round Two.” You can download “Round One” here: www.grassrootsfundraising.org/magazine/feature25_2.pdf.

In the spirit of continuing the discussion about nonprofit boards that began with the article “The Elephant in the Board Room” in the March/April issue of the *Journal*, I offer the following thoughts from the perspective of a board member. Based on my board experiences with various organizations over the past 20+ years, I reflect primarily on the issue of the board’s role in fundraising, one of those ongoing challenges for most organizations I know. This is an issue that is usually about more than what appears on the surface.

REFRAMING THE FUNDRAISING ROLE OF THE BOARD

In my day job as a fundraising consultant, I have spent many years trying to convince both board and staff people that fundraising is an essential part of a board member’s responsibilities. Over time, however, I’ve become increasingly uneasy as an organization’s emphasis on fundraising leads board members to feel sidelined when it comes to the political and program issues that brought them to want to serve the organization in the first place.

I’ve been on boards where the executive director has made clear that fundraising is really the only thing the staff wants board members to work on, and that a board role in program, governance, and strategic thinking and planning is considered neither essential nor even particularly

desired. This is an unfortunate development that will ultimately not produce a more willing team of board fundraisers. In fact, it has just the opposite effect: Board members are far less likely to be enthusiastic about raising money if they are not involved in the organization’s purposes in a meaningful way.

I once served on the board of an organization in which the staff developed all of the budgeting and fundraising plans and expected the board would quietly nod approval (and appreciation for the staff’s hard work) and then cheerfully proceed to bring in as much money as possible from our networks of friends and other contacts.

I quickly discovered that my questions about the budget and my disagreements with some of the priorities that had been set around fundraising were treated with surprise and some resentment by the executive director. Asking questions was interpreted as challenging the wisdom and experience of the staff, who felt that we had hired them to carry out these kinds of tasks. In “The Elephant in the Board Room,” the authors identified the ability to deal with (and even to expect and encourage) debate and disagreement to be key to a healthy board. Too often, however, board members raising questions feel the staff see them as disloyal and wasting time.

Whatever one thinks about the role of the board in developing financial and fundraising plans, not being invited to give input and raise questions about how major decisions are made can leave board members less motivated to carry out their fundraising tasks. This winds up being a vicious cycle: board members don’t raise the money they could have because they have questions and concerns that

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were not addressed; the staff perceive the questions and concerns to be meddling and annoying — even more so when the board members aren't producing any money!

Like most people, I join boards to contribute my time, expertise and enthusiasm to causes I care deeply about. Part of what motivates me to give my time to the very serious responsibility of serving on a board of directors is the opportunity to be engaged in the political analysis that informs the work of the organization and the discussions about strategies and tactics in our efforts to make change. The connection with like-minded people also committed to making a difference through the work of an organization is part of what inspires me to take the sometimes scary step of asking for support for this work from my friends, family and acquaintances. My belief in — and connection to — the vitally important work of an organization makes me far more likely to want to ask people for money to support the group's work.

FUNDRAISING AND THE “REAL” WORK

A related problem is one familiar to nonprofits: the tendency of most organizations to consider fundraising as an unfortunate but necessary burden that brings in the resources needed for the staff to carry out the “real” work. When the board's responsibility to do fundraising is approached in this way, it's no wonder that board members are often less than thrilled to participate.

But if the organization views fundraising as a part of the work that organizes new constituencies to learn about and care about the cause, that is a mechanism through which people are educated about an issue, and that can create community awareness and visibility for a group, there might be a more enthusiastic response to fundraising activities from board members. When board members ask their friends, family, colleagues and neighbors to become a member, make a contribution, attend a special event, or purchase a raffle ticket, they are recruiting potential new allies and supporters to the cause rather than just seeking financial gifts.

A recent meeting I had with a donor (as a board member) reinforced this idea. Although the purpose of the meeting was to ask him to consider increasing his gift, most of our time together was spent discussing whether we could better mobilize people to take action on the group's issues by getting more media coverage or by one-on-one recruitment. This was a perfect example of how a fundraising meeting gave me new ideas (and questions) for the kinds of strategies and approaches the group is taking in our work. Every conversation with a donor has the potential for gathering information, informing decisions, and influencing public opinion on issues.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE BOARD

A friend complained to me recently that the actual work of being on a board was totally different from what she had expected. Most of the time, it seemed, the board of the organization she served was focused on personnel matters, by-law revisions, recruitment of new board members, and fundraising. Her enthusiasm about the organization had waned as input or involvement on a

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programmatic level was discouraged by the executive director and limited to staff reports given at board meetings.

A board I currently serve on seems to be going the same way. When first formed, the number of members wanting to serve on the board outnumbered board slots. The election process was a lively one, with candidates taking seriously their need to convince the membership of their qualifications to serve. People saw being on the board as a way to be engaged in setting political direction for the organization and being closely connected to important work. In the most recent election, however, there were not enough candidates to fill all of the board positions. It seems that what started as a board that was highly engaged in political discussion and strategizing is now more often than not bogged down in administrative details, financial challenges, and personnel issues — with less enthusiasm for board service as a result.

QUESTIONS

These dilemmas raise two questions. The first is, how does a board maintain its engagement in the more vital, programmatic areas of an organization's work even as its responsibilities grow to encompass such things as personnel issues, insurance policies, and cash flow challenges?

In “The Elephant in the Board Room,” the authors suggest that a process-oriented approach to board structure might have more positive results:

Many boards work for some period of time — the chair is good, the executive director works well with the board, the committees click. Every structure works for a while, and then doesn't seem to work any longer. Some new structure is needed to kick-start the board into better functioning. What we need is to analyze, document and develop the process by which an organization would choose one structure over another at any given time, and the process by which they would move on to a new structure when the old one no longer works. In this new approach, all structures would be temporary and permeable, more like tents than buildings.

So rather than search for the one perfect structural solution, we might find some more creative ways to deal with these changes and still keep the political vision, membership engagement and strategic thinking at the heart of the leadership we provide as a board.

The second question relates to the changing nature of the staff. The increased professionalization of nonprofit staff has led to greater authority, reflected in such titles as CEO and president that were unheard of in all but very large nonprofits 20 years ago. It has also led to a truncated role for board members, who are relied on less to bring needed expertise and strategic thinking. For organizations with active members (particularly those involved in community organizing and building a strong base of members to generate enough power to make political change), how can organizations overcome a divide created by this increased professionalization of staff in which members are less central to defining the goals and direction of the organization?

This last question deserves more discussion and debate among the different constituents in nonprofit organizations and will be the topic of future articles.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

The solutions to the challenges I've described here are not simple, overnight ones. They require changes on the parts of both board and staff. For now, I propose the following suggestions to executive directors and other staff who work closely with board members.

- Recognize that while board members are busy people whose follow-through is not always what one would like, their willingness to do the less exciting work will be greater if they are more engaged in the heart of the work of the organization.

- Encourage debate and discussion on the part of board members and other constituents of your organization. Don't assume that questions are judgments or criticisms of the staff's hard work. By taking the time to consider questions and examine different points of view, creative ideas to what may have seemed like intractable problems can emerge.

- Continue to work toward the integration of fundraising and program work. (For more on this topic, see my article, "Creating a Culture of Fundraising in Your Organization," in the *Journal*, Vol. 20 #3, May/June 2001).

- Address the growing divide between staff and board that has resulted from increased professionalization of the sector. While the paid staff may in fact be the best informed about an issue or program, think about ways that having a process for including the views, perspectives and differences of others (board, volunteers, donors and the community being served) can actually expand the impact of your work.

Ultimately, the ability of this sector to achieve our goals will partly depend on our ability to avoid relegating each group — board, staff, member, volunteer, donor — into compartments that limit their contribution, input and authority. We will build on the excitement, passion and willingness to jump in and do the work required — even the less thrilling and more tedious work — because we're sharing that burden even as we each have a voice in the organization. **GFJ**

STEPHANIE ROTH IS EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF THE *GRASSROOTS FUNDRAISING JOURNAL*.