

## **Why Don't Board Members Do What They're Supposed to Do?**

**By: Hardy Smith**

“Why don't board members do what they're supposed to do?” shouted a packed room of nonprofit organization leaders. This quick, loud response came when the training session participants were asked to share their most pressing problem.

The unified reaction, with heads nodding in agreement, set off an energetic buzz throughout the audience. Obviously a red hot issue had been identified!

However the room quickly fell silent when the audience was asked “Do the board members whose performance is being criticized know what they are supposed to be doing? And are they being asked, or being told, what you want done?”

Immediately the participants realized that they might be playing a contributing role in the lack of desired action by their board members.

As a result of that highly charged audience reaction, a nationwide survey was conducted of business and community leaders who serve as board members of nonprofit and community organizations. Its objective was to identify issues affecting relationships between nonprofit organizations and their board members. Survey responses came from what would be considered a blue chip list of board members.

Survey participants reflected a wide variety of occupations and interests, including university presidents, top corporate executives, business owners, association CEOs, retirees, teachers, community activists, political leaders, doctors, attorneys, engineers, both management and nonmanagement level employees, a college basketball official, and dedicated volunteers.

Despite the demographic diversity, survey participants all shared taking their personal involvement with nonprofit organizations very seriously. Their answers also revealed common issues they feel strongly about, along with possible solutions.

In addition to getting responses to the priority question – *Why don't board members do what they're supposed to do?* – the survey collected suggestions

on how organizations can be more effective in engaging their existing and future board members with four other key questions:

- When asked to serve on a nonprofit board, what motivates you to say yes?
- Other than time, what would be some reasons you would turn down a board position?
- As a board member, what is your biggest criticism related to organizations and relations with their boards?
- How can organizations be more effective in utilizing their board members?

The results reveal board members' candid opinions on their relationships with organizations. In fact their responses show they are just as passionate about those relationships as the organizations are about board member performance!

Of course many organizations enjoy highly effective, very engaged boards. But for those who don't, and for those who want to make sure their board member relationships remain strong, paying attention to what these board members have to say – as well as listening to your own board members – will pay big dividends.

Six recurring themes were identified as the foundation for most issues and solutions: connectivity, no surprises, importance of time, improved communications, accountability, and organizational focus.

A large majority of respondents said they want to feel a personal connection to an organization's cause or issue before getting involved. Very few said they got involved just because the cause was a good one. Be sure you have the right people for your organization by taking time to understand their interests and abilities. In other words, pre-qualify your board candidates for compatibility.

Make sure you have effective communications with your board prospects on expectations of their role. Make sure those expectations are clearly laid out and agreed to by the board prospect. **NO SURPRISES LATER!!** If they are going to be asked to raise or give money, they need to know that up front. *This is a major issue.*

Organizations must recognize the importance of time to their board members. Despite being asked to list reasons other than time for turning

down a board position, many of the survey participants still gave that as a reason for saying no. Clearly time is something those surveyed feel strongly about! All activities must be run as efficiently as possible with no time wasted. Also recognize that a good board prospect just might be too busy to participate, and a “no” could actually be the best response to your invitation.

Many of the issues mentioned could be solved through improved communications with board members. It is hard to have a positive relationship if someone doesn't feel good communication exists. And remember, listening is a critical part of effective communications. Board members will question their involvement, and commitment, when they feel they are not being listened to.

Survey participants believe strongly that accountability of board members should be a priority. They are clearly frustrated by nonperformers. Organizations failing to deal with this issue are missing needed performance and at the same time are at risk for losing board members who are productive.

Other major reasons cited for declining a board invitation or for leaving a board position include nonprofits being run without an organized focus, reputation issues, financial questions, staff who does not project a professional image, or being known for having any of the previously mentioned challenges.

Organizations experiencing difficulty in recruiting or retaining board members need to undertake an honest evaluation of themselves and their board relationships.

Utilizing the insights revealed by this survey will help you answer the burning question *Why don't board members do what they're supposed to do?* It will also help avoid future problems, and ensure that valuable board members stay engaged.

**(Author Hardy Smith conducted the *Why Don't Board Members Do What They're Supposed to Do?* survey to help organizations maximize relationships with their board members. As a speaker and consultant, he creates high performance success for nonprofits, associations, and volunteer based organizations. Learn more about Hardy by visiting: [www.hardysmith.com](http://www.hardysmith.com) )**