

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

By: Hardy Smith

"Why don't board members do what they are supposed to do" shouted a packed room of nonprofit organization leaders. The quick and loud response came after I asked those participating in my training session on Creating Successful Fundraising Events to share their most pressing problem.

The unified response, 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 I asked "Do the board members whose performance is being criticized know what they are supposed to be doing? And are you asking them or telling them what you want done?"

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

As a result of that highly charged audience reaction, I spent a year and a half researching relationships between nonprofit organizations and their board members.

A nationwide survey was conducted of community and business leaders who serve as board members of nonprofit and community organizations. The more than one hundred responses received came from what would be considered a blue chip list of board members any organization would want to have.

A sampling of the wide variety of occupations and interests of survey participants includes university presidents, top corporate executives, business owners, association CEOs, retirees, teachers, community activists, political leaders, doctors, attorneys, engineers, both management and non management level employees, a college basketball official, and individuals who dedicate themselves to volunteering.

Despite different backgrounds and being a diverse demographic group, the participants all shared taking their personal involvement with any nonprofit organization very seriously. Their answers also revealed common issues they feel strongly about. At the same time, solutions to those problems were also identified.

In addition to getting responses for the priority question why don't board members do what they are supposed to do; the survey collected suggestions on how organizations can be more effective in engaging their existing and future board members with four additional questions:

- When asked to serve on a nonprofit board, what motivates you to say yes?
- Other than time, what would be some reasons you have turned 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 show board members definitely have shared opinions on their relationships with organizations. In fact their responses show they are just as passionate about those relationships as the feelings organizations have 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) will pay big dividends.

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

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

Make sure you have effective communications with your board prospect on expectations of their role. Make sure those expectations are understood 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.

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. So clearly time is something those surveyed feel strongly about!

Organizations must recognize the importance of time to their board members. 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 response to your invitation is actually the best answer.

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

Survey participants strongly believe accountability of board members should be a priority. They are clearly frustrated by non performers. 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.

Nonprofits not being run with an organized focus, having reputation issues, questions about finances, staff not projecting a professional image, or being known for having any of the previously mentioned challenges were given as major reasons for declining a board invitation and reasons for leaving a board position. Organizations

experiencing difficulty in recruiting or retaining board members likely need to undertake an honest evaluation of themselves.

Responses to each of the survey's five questions are listed below. Responses are in order of frequency mentioned.

**Question One: When asked to serve on a nonprofit board, what motivates you to say yes?**

1. Must relate to cause, have interest in organization, feel a meaningful connection.
2. Must have ability to make an impact /not just be a name on letterhead.
3. Opinion of current board members
4. Time
5. Board/organization's history/reputation. Perception of how organized board/organization is.
6. Quality staff.
7. Person who is asking.
8. Relates to personal/professional/business objectives.
9. Is organization financially sound?
10. Being a right fit/do skill sets match.

**Note:** Very few said must be a good cause. They wanted specific connection to cause.

**Question Two: Other than time, what would be some reasons you have turned down a board position?**

1. Board not organized/goals not clear/not effective/reputation/financial questions.
2. Not personally interested/no personal connection/their goals not a priority.
3. Time
4. Unable to meet responsibilities.
5. Current members of board

6. Personal cost or too much fundraising
7. Staff
8. Current leadership
9. A name only board.
10. Conflict of interest

**Question Three: What advice would you offer to organizations who ask this question: Why don't board members do what they are supposed to do?**

1. Lack of direction. Roles/duties/responsibilities not clearly defined when asked to serve. No orientation or training.
2. Board members are not held accountable.
3. Individuals are on board for wrong reasons.
4. Right people are not being recruited.
5. Better screening/evaluating of prospective board members.
6. Soft sell approach when recruiting.
7. Not having buy in from board members. Not feeling involved.
8. Not being specific with task requests.
9. Poor communications.
10. Being asked to do too much.
11. No follow up.
12. Need better leadership.

**Question Four: As a board member, what is your biggest criticism related to organizations and relations with their boards?**

1. Communication related issues.
2. Lack of clear direction/leadership and no clear definition of duties.
3. Organizations not being run efficiently or effectively. Time wasted.
4. Board members not being listened to.

5. Meetings poorly organized, not having purpose, too long, too frequent.
6. Individual skills and interests of board members not taken advantage of.
7. Staff performance plus numerous staff related issues regarding relationships with board members.
8. Not knowing where the money is.
9. Being given too much work to do.

**Observation from survey responses:**

Board members are clearly frustrated by nonperforming board members. Board members not participating according to expectation creates a negative effect on rest of board.

**Question Five: How can organization be more effective in utilizing their board members?**

1. Clearly define what is being requested.
2. Listen to their opinions.
3. Have good effective communications.
4. Get buy in. Create ownership.
5. Limit tasks they are asked to do.
6. Know your board members and play to their strengths.
7. Recognize their accomplishments.
8. Don't take them for granted.
9. Make sure your board members know each other.
10. Have fun.
11. Have accountability measures in place.

**Good action step suggestions from survey responses:**

- Have individual meetings with each board member to get to know them.
- Visit with each and develop year in advance individual chart of work plan.
- Recruit the 4 w's: workers, worriers, wealth, and wise.

- Bring organizational challenges to board for brainstorming.
- Help bake the cake-you own the cake!

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