



How To Be An Effective Board Member!

THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS DELINEATES A PRIVATE CLUB'S KEY TO SUCCESS. THAT'S A POINT REITERATED TIME AND AGAIN NOT ONLY IN PUBLISHER'S PERSPECTIVE, BUT IN THE WRITING AND OPINIONS OF MANY OTHERS INTIMATELY INVOLVED IN THE PRIVATE CLUB INDUSTRY.

No – the board of directors isn't working in isolation, and undoubtedly a strong cohesive board gives a private club the thrust, the drive and impetus for a club to establish its vision and achieve the club's goals and mission.

Notwithstanding that push, distractions do arise...like a disruptive board member (*Publisher's Perspective, BoardRoom magazine, September/October 2008*).

Disruptors somehow have the uncanny ability to wreck havoc on a board of directors and a private club with even minor issues creating big trouble. And the disruptor won't go away unless the board of directors initiates strong steps to either dull the disruptor's behavior, or ultimately replace them on the board.

So flip the coin, what's makes an effective board member? How can we find directors desirous of encouraging cooperation and working for the general good of the club? What does it really mean to be 'an effective board member?'

It's patently clear with club boards, as it is in many aspects of life where we depend upon other people for what we do, that a board of directors is only as

effective as its weakest member. If a board member isn't doing the job they committed to and for, it unquestionably has a tremendous impact not only on the board of directors, but also the entire private club.

This is especially true if a board member is the "weakest link" because of their own choosing...i.e. lack of commitment, little or no pre-board meeting preparation, being a disruptor or a failed team player. Make no mistake, someone choosing to be the weakest link is a reality for many private clubs. Think about it...who fits the bill?

How many evenings or board meetings have been frittered away with little being accomplished because of ineffective board members? How often have you left the board meeting with a feeling that little if anything has been accomplished?

This is where it all begins...where the board not only has to be on board, but board members have to be on board. The focus has to be on what we call "stewardship", where the objective is strong focused decision-making coming from well prepared, effective board members constantly guiding and providing leadership and stewardship for your private club.

The stewardship and process of being an effective board member begins long before becoming a board member. The process needs to be well developed and well defined to ensure that the best candidates with the proper motives and skill sets are on the club's ballot for directors' positions.



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Board members are part time volunteers, who while they may mean well, often have little understanding about the operation of a club, and the parameters of responsibility, behavior and limits of power.

Often there's a lack of clarity of roles for both the board and its individual members. The board sees itself, and acts unconsciously as the club's management, a method that's not in the club's best interests in these days of highly skilled, paid managers.

This is a major reason why a board orientation each and every year is so vital. So that the club's general manager and staff can provide vital information about the daily operations, strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities. It will help in the process of developing effective board members who in turn will help the board make diligent, insightful policy decisions.

Well-qualified candidates are a strong first step toward guaranteeing an effective board member and integration of well-qualified members into the board environment is vital if they are to be successful and contribute to the long-range health of the club. It's

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also vital to expose newcomers to the club's structure, systems, policies and procedures so they can readily assimilate and contribute in a much shorter time period.

Let's step back and look at an effective board member's qualities.

For Edgar Stoesz, retired chairperson of Habitat for Humanity International, and author of the recent book *"Doing Good Even Better: How to be an Effective Board Member"*, suggests board members can be effective because "behind every nonprofit there is a board, usually made up of successful, accomplished community leaders, united in a common goal: they are passionate about doing good by governing...the organization at hand." In other words, they're committed.

But more than commitment is necessary. Private club boards are unique...and being a director is a challenging "job", often wildly different from what people know in their professional everyday workplace. Stoesz maintains, "Without proper training, mentoring and guidance, even the most highly accomplished board members can find themselves lost and overwhelmed."

How does a club member become an 'effective board member?' It's not just a matter of showing up for a meeting. The process starts before joining the board, continues through your tenure and planning for successors.

Boards are most successful when board members share the same vision about who and what their club is and what it's trying to do i.e. meet club members' needs and wants. And much of this sharing vision today comes from development and establishment of a strategic plan, which carries the vision and mission in the club's action plans (board policy decisions carried out by paid management).

A board's ineffectiveness often can arise if some members are operating with very different, unspoken expectations at cross-purposes to each other.

"To best enhance a board experience and provide effective leadership...the process begins with understanding the organization's mission, condition and direction of the organization, board needs and the best fit for a new members," explains Boulder, CO-based Lester Karplus, a 30-year veteran of working with boards in a recent writing.

Before joining the board Karplus says to consider these requirements:

Personal Fit: What's the time commitment each month? How long is the term and are extensions expected? What skills are required? If this is good fit? What benefits will you gain from this experience? Is there a financial commitment?

Due Diligence: You'll need some time to meet all the players and learn more about your club's board, its functions and policies. Ask questions, understand the club's strengths and weaknesses. What's your club's vision and mission? Has that

been clearly defined for paid managers who must enact the board's policies? Is your club relying on a strategic plan to guide the future? Is there a strong paid management? What's the financial condition of the club and what are the club's greatest challenges (i.e. membership marketing, recruiting, retention and club usage)?

Getting Started: This begins in a number of ways, but often getting involved on a club committee can lead to a board position in subsequent years. Once you're involved, the appropriate direction (and board interests) will often reveal themselves.

Motivation: If you don't have the motivation, don't become a board member. Determine what makes you support your private club's vision and mission? Are you really passionate about your involvement? Do you enjoy hanging out with others at the club and are you looking for another way to hone your skills?

Will you bail if times get tough, or will you dig in and be a solution provider?

Knowing why you want to be a board member goes a long way to helping you become an effective board member.

On-Board: Once you're on the board, it's important to commit to a meaningful role, engage in the group process to ensure that the club's vision, mission and goals are carried out in a fiscally prudent manner.

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An annual board retreat and orientation is the first step necessary in assisting newcomers to be effective board members. Board members benefit from a review of your club's purposes so that everyone shares the same perception of your club and board is trying to accomplish. Directors need to understand the club's history, its institutional memory, members' needs and wants and how the club is going to achieve its goals and objectives. And newcomers must clearly understand the board's role in all of this...developing policy while leaving the enactment of policy to the club's paid managers, without interference or micromanagement from board members.

Your Role: As we've suggested all too often board members think showing up at a meeting ensures their effectiveness on the board. Not today! It's an evolutionary process, but the best use of each member's talents and time usually surfaces over time, and it should be continually evaluated related to the board's overall needs and club's issues. Often initial effectiveness comes with an immersion in committee work, for example, the finance, marketing, program, operations, personnel, sports, and board development committees.

Simply understanding the club's strategic goals and policies – valuable tools – makes a board member's job easier and enhances a person's effectiveness. Policies established by the board of directors are time savers, tension reducers and fairness

enablers, which leaves the policy implementation to paid managers, who don't have to spend time debating the issues.

It's vitally important for board to retain a clear vision of the two separate but critical functions – 1) establishing policies (the board's responsibility) and 2) implementing the board's policies (paid management's responsibility).

PREPARING FOR DECISION MAKING

A board member's first task is meeting preparation. You've offered your time and energy, but have you ever been sitting in a board meeting daydreaming or wondering about all the other things you can be doing?

You've made the commitment and the point is: a meeting's success is determined long before it begins. A board member's diligent preparation leads to good board decisions. That includes reading background material, board policies relevant to topics on the agenda and understanding how they affect decisions your board may be making.

Policies are guidelines the club's board has established over the years relevant to certain topics. They're roadmaps that keep the group on track without wandering hopelessly in circles. That's why your board has the policies...it's likely been over that ground before, encountered its barriers, so policies give boards a roadmap guiding the way.

Oh yes, some policies may need modification (passing years can be an important factor here), but new decisions don't surface until board members clearly understand existing policies.

When issues arise, check the board's policy manual for guidance and relevant passages. If a policy doesn't make sense, research it. Find out why it was passed in the first place and seek as much clarification as possible.

But watch out for the 'de facto minefield – that's how we've always done it.'

Stop, think and state your thoughts clearly, pull together the board's best thinking to help the board get where it wants to go...to reach the decision it want to make. Evaluate proposals for their relevance to your club's goals, financial resources and long-term implications for members.

Don't act without policy guidance and if there isn't a policy in place, construct one.

Making Decisions: An effective board members' role is prudent evaluation and decision-making.

- Listen and evaluate proposals. What are the club's priorities? Are proposals clear, feasible and in line with the club's policies? Are resources available?
- Facilitating cooperative group decision-making. Present and offer relevant information during debate. Ask questions for clarification; propose refinements as needed. A clearly stated motion or proposal will state the problem, what will be done, by who, when, how it will be funded and evaluated.
- Directors should direct. To fulfill the role of an effective director, a person must take a proactive approach. Ask

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tough, informed questions and get involved. As fiduciaries, directors must exercise duty of care through an objective, reasonable prudent standard of skill and care in discharging their functions, including the obligation to see that the club functions within the law to achieve its purposes.

Duty of loyalty binds the director to act in good faith and in the club's best interests, without directors placing themselves in a position where the duties of the club and their personal interests conflict.

DIRECTORS AS CLUB AMBASSADORS

Acting as a club ambassador is another significant task of an effective board member because of the ability and willingness to promote the board's mission and goals to club members. That means promoting the board's position without bias, without a personal agenda and to the benefit of club members.

All too often we find self-serving directors who, during board meetings may appear to be following the 'party' line, but who then take every opportunity to create division and diversions when tipping a pint with golfing buddies in the men's grill.

While each board member will be most effective if they understand the club's strategic plan, goals and objectives, there are other poignant considerations especially the group's dynamics.

Robert's Rules of Order are the guide, but it's surprising the number of board members unaware of this basic meeting process. While it's not absolutely necessary to insist on the formality all the time, Robert's Rules offers a great foundation for effective meetings.

Team player: Work cooperatively with other board members and the club's management team. Put your personal agenda aside. Don't manipulate issues to sabotage efforts of perceived rivals.

Show up for board and committee meetings on time, and don't leave early. Arrive prepared, ready to get involved. Time is precious, so stay on task to deal with the issues. And if necessary have the board establish time limits, i.e. 90- minutes, for board meetings.

This is a point stressed by Dick Kopplin, president of Kopplin & Kuebler, LLC., an executive recruiting firm based in Scottsdale, AZ and Jupiter, Fla.

"I believe that most private club board members can and should conduct their typical monthly board meetings within a time frame of 90 minutes. In order to accomplish 90 minutes of productive business it's necessary to follow a few simple tenets."

Kopplin says that means 1) "having a president who is adamant about adhering to the meeting agenda 2) having a set of norms and expectations, which set the framework for every Board meeting. One is the stated intent of the board to focus on policy, strategy and results during the meeting and not on day-to-day operations; 3) recognizing that the work of the club should be done with the staff and the club committees, not the board.

PUBLISHER'S FINAL THOUGHTS

Support the decisions you and your colleagues make. Contribute by discussion and exploration of issues.

Sure, play the devil's advocate if you must to better understand a situation or proposal, but know when it's time to lend support. Compromise when necessary and work toward building board consensus for the betterment of the club and its members.

Listen to others, especially those who may have opposing views and show respect for your colleagues and management who have also made the commitment to be an effective board member.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with having your own opinions as opposed to what we might consider 'Groupthink'. Effective board members certainly are conscious of dealing with the issues with well thought out positions and debating points, as opposed to 'stick in the mud' unproductive patterns and dysfunctional behavior as one might expect from a disruptive board member.

At least that's the way I see it. **BR**

John G. Fornaro, publisher

If you have comments on this article or suggestions for other topics, please contact John Fornaro at (949) 376-8889, ext. 4 or via email: johnf@apcd.com

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