

Module 1.1: Governance, Leadership & Mission

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Renz, 2004

Non-profit governing boards are “where the buck stops.” At least in the US, the board oversees operations, acts as the public face of the organisation, and sets the course for the mission. Board-members are legally obligated to be conscientious leaders and act in good-faith, complying with the mission of the non-profit. As part of their fiduciary responsibility, board-members handle funds and assets as if in trust for the communities they serve; this entails external audits to “get a second opinion” of the organisations efforts and success.

Renz moves on to describe the structures and characteristics of governing boards. Most have, at minimum, a chair, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer as officers. Standing committees, special task forces, and consultants also assist the board with decisions and operations; typical committee tasks include acting on behalf of the board, nominating officers to the board, raising and managing funds, &c. Renz cautions that these committees and task forces not take over the role of existing organs within a non-profit or only as an emergency measure if they must. Beyond legal obligations, officers are expected to actively contribute to and prepare for meetings, understand the bylaws and mission of the non-profit, and work as supportive and effective leader to the organisation.

Negligent or careless officers on the board are at best unhelpful, at worst a liability to the rest of the organisation, and as such can be sanctioned for the good of the non-profit. Renz gives extra attention to conflicts of interests; such conflicts are unavoidable, but disclosing conflicts and removing the conflicted party from deliberation and decision is expected.

Pew, 2007

Writing Op-Eds

Op-Ed Project: Tips & Tricks

Op-Eds, being aimed at a general lay audience, are best written in plain language but with respect for the audience’s intelligence. These pieces seek to influence opinion and change minds, even those who already disagree with the point being made. Approaching the opposition with understanding and respect is half the battle.

Before one writes an editorial, it not only helps to ask oneself why the reader should listen to your opinion but also to remain confident in one’s expertise. Novelty of thinking is also good here: to make a contribution to the discourse

on the topic. Lastly, basing the argument on credible, verifiable evidence is always preferable to speculation.

The authors present the most basic skeleton of an Op-Ed. The hook relates to current events that make the piece timely and relevant; this sequesters into the thesis statement of the argument. The Rule of Three keeps the piece long enough to be substantive but short enough to be digestible; three conclusions derived from evidence support the thesis. Before concluding, anticipate counterarguments to your points. Put a bow on it by circling back to the lede.

The Lede grabs the attention of the reader and draws them to read the rest of the article. There are many ways to do this, either by ripping from the headlines or relating a personal or humorous anecdote in the back of the cab (as Thomas Friedman too often does).

When submitting an editorial, consider which outlet offers the best platform to influence the minds you want to change. National newspapers are prestigious, but an Op-Ed about Public Transportation in Southern Nashville does more good at the local level than the national. Check in with editors without appearing demanding or presumptuous, but be wary of building a reputation as a crank or fool who has nothing interesting to say. Have a backup in the event it is rejected, and don't submit to more than one paper in the same market region.

A study of the Washington Post in 2008 found that women are far less likely to have their Op-Ed; one can only hope things have improved since then. Op-Ed Project offers resources and workshops for people to hone their skills.