



Unlocking Innovation in Board Development

by Carlo Cuesta from Creation in Common for the Spring 2010 issue of Nonprofit News

Unlocking innovation needs to be the first priority of board development. It's the ability for volunteers to share their creative ideas with one another in order to elevate strategy and propel the organization's mission forward.

Board members need to believe that their talents will create something meaningful and impacting. As a group, they need to see how their abilities come together into a useful whole that guides the organization forward. Otherwise, their talents are wasted and the desire to participate may suffer.

The typical board meeting is set up to convey, receive and process large amounts of information in short periods. The challenge is knowing how to cultivate creative thinking that leads to innovative approaches within the constraints of available time and focus. Many nonprofit boards are successful at unlocking innovation by creating a big picture that they can easily reference in order to see how major actions across the organization relate to one another.

For example, boards need to see how their efforts to develop people (new members and staff leadership) will influence how they raise funds and how raising funds and developing people affects (and is affected by) how they oversee resources. More importantly, the board needs to see how these activities connect to organizational priorities defined by its mission and strategic goals. Through this "big picture," individual members have a reference point in which to gauge performance, track results, and trace issues; the board as a whole has a common framework that fuels discussion and collaboration.

Here are four ways a board can develop its ability to see the "big picture" and unlock innovation.

Engage the Cause

Even though they may never be cause experts, board members need to build a working understanding of how the organization delivers value. This is about creating opportunities for program and service experiences that give members direct contact with staff and participants. Here they can see how dollars work, why staff are so important, and where investment must occur.

Make Plans that Foster Orientation

Creating continuity from board meeting to board meeting is essential. Strategic plans that align goals, actions and outcomes to specific indicators and benchmarks help board members identify where the organization is at and how they can contribute to forwarding the organization's overall strategy.

Connect Instead of Meet

To make the most of board members' time, meeting agendas need to focus less on reporting and more on facilitating discussion that helps board members address system-wide issues, coordinate action across functions, and adjust the overall strategy based on changes in the external environment as well as the organization's performance.

Motivate Action Through Compelling Outcomes and Goals

Along with seeing the big picture as a board, committees and taskforces need to know what success looks like within their specific efforts and that the goals they are striving to achieve are meaningful. Clear and compelling outcomes and goals motivate action; they deepen engagement and get members past the demands of the work itself.

Every volunteer board member has an innate desire to apply his or her creative self to making a difference. Board development that focuses on unlocking innovation applies board members skills, expertise, and life experiences to challenges that grow their individual gifts and deepen their ability to govern as a group.

By rethinking how a board operates, the right balance can be struck between the efficient use of time and the desire to affect an organization's future.

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