

Becoming A Board Member: Hammering Plywood Boards Or Flying On Snowboards

February, 2005

Framers create sound houses, safe dwelling places for life within. Snowboarders carve big turns in powder snow, leap off cliffs. Board members must be both, walking a taut tightrope between the platforms of accountability and safety, of renewal and daring. Boards develop mission statements, policies, future directions, and evaluation processes, blueprints for the on-going work of their organizations. Boards also invest, the organization's financial, physical, human, and community capital, and their own selves, in reaching for the stars.

Jennifer looked around her at the fresh faces, four of whom were new to the Board. The Board meeting was about to start, somewhat late. People seemed welcoming. Short formal introductions were made, it being the first Board meeting after the annual meeting. Three and a half hours later, bum sore, mind drained, Jennifer drove home, puzzled: "What had she got herself into?" There was an agenda of sorts, handed out at the beginning. Two hours had been taken up listening to the Executive Director's oral report, in the midst of which, several issues seem to leap out of the blue, with small groups of Board members yelling at each other and almost coming to blows. Mostly, people seemed to be protecting something: the past, a favourite program, or themselves.

Fred, one of the other new Board members, had leapt into the fray, offering an experience from another organization that he had been involved in, where a performance pay system had been successfully introduced. People listened politely, but their bodies talked otherwise. Jennifer had offered to serve on a task force developing investment policies. Being a banker, she thought she had something to contribute, and talked of the importance of taking some risk to maximize the revenues that the organization obviously needed. Her offer, too, was politely rejected.

A nightmare story, perhaps, though common enough. What went wrong?

Becoming a Board member starts when the call comes: "Would you be interested in being on our Board? We meet monthly. It would only take 1-2 hours of your time." The questions to ask are: Why do you want me to be on your Board?, What contributions do you see me making?, What are the basic expectations of each Board member?, What are the challenges facing the organization?, and How does this Board balance accountability with renewal?

Becoming a Board member means orientation. We rarely hire new staff without orienting them fully to the organization, their work and expectations, and their fellow employees. Why should Board members be different? If a formal orientation is not offered, demand one, or make one up for yourself. Read the Board orientation manual, check out the web site, ask questions of the Executive Director and other Board members, informally wander around in the organization. And, remember the golden rule: "Organizations are complex. It takes time, often months, to begin to find one's way within them".

Becoming a Board member means making no assumptions, entering on an often steep, learning curve. Organizations are unique: their histories, mandates, cultures, leadership styles, and ways of doing business. People react to outsiders, even if they have been invited. Becoming a Board member involves learning for some time, then acting and producing, and later offering wisdom to new Board members.

Jennifer looked around her at the fresh faces, four of whom like, were new to the Board. The meeting was about to start, on time. She had spent two days at the organization since the annual meeting, talking with the Executive Director and her management staff, touring the organization's sites, and reading. The agenda and background materials for the Board meeting had arrived by courier four days previously, plenty of time to prepare. Yesterday she had had coffee with the chairperson of the Board. He warmly welcomed her, and asked her if she would be prepared to serve on a new task force to develop investment policies. He had been frank about the need for the Board to take more risks, and offered Jennifer introductions to several bankers in the community who had considerable experience in being Board members.

Two hours later, Jennifer drove home, smiling, energized. She had made what seemed like a sound choice. During the meeting, she had been quiet, listening and learning. Her offer to serve on the investment policies task force, to research other organizations' approaches, had been well received. She was looking forward to the Board retreat the next month, "An opportunity for all of us to learn from each other, go more deeply into the choices we face as an organization, and to challenge each other in becoming a Board that makes a real difference", the chairman had said.

Becoming a Board member, like finding the right career or the right speaking engagement, is more about finding an organization where there is a good fit. Is what you have to offer going to make a real difference? Will your passions be served?

Being a Board member means participating in meetings. The more efficient and effective the meetings are, the more Board members feel satisfied. The basics are: start and end on time, have an agenda and stick to it, make sure the issues to be addressed are clearly noted on the agenda, send out materials beforehand so people can prepare, place the toughest issues in the middle of the agenda.

Being a Board member also means recognizing that each organization is unique. What the organization needs from its Board this year, next year, is far more important than theoretical statements about Board roles, responsibilities, duties, and liabilities.

Gavin Perryman is a facilitator, teacher, and writer, working with Boards across Canada, from the arts to professional associations, and from libraries to child care services. He has published a workbook on Creating Boards That Matter, and essays on the changing roles of Boards in more turbulent times. If you have a quick question, he would be happy to respond (gavinp@telus.net).