



Re: Solutions to Association and Chamber Challenges

Every year I meet with more than 1,000 executive directors. Often in the setting of a classroom, board training, strategic plan facilitation or a social event.

With about 150,000 associations and chambers in the US, their questions are somewhat common. Every organization experiences issues for which they seek solutions.

The four areas of persistent concern include:

- Boards and Governance
- Committee Management
- Strategic Planning
- Policy Implementation

This memo identifies 40 of the most frequent questions; and then suggests perspectives and solutions for each to initiate a dialog for implementing improvement.

Best wishes.

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Ten Challenges with Boards

	The Challenges	Solutions
1.	<i>Directors don't understand their responsibilities.</i>	Deliver an effective board orientation; provide access to a leadership manual or password protected board portal.
2.	<i>The board simply isn't engaged.</i>	When directors lose attention, be sure the work, agendas and discussions focus on the mission and goals. The strategic direction should be clear and compelling to engage volunteers.
3.	<i>Some directors don't show up, repeatedly missing meetings.</i>	Follow the bylaws and promote fiduciary responsibility, especially duty of care. Directors attend officially called meetings to fulfill their roles.
4.	<i>The board prefers to manage, not govern.</i>	The purpose of a board is governance according to corporate law. Management is a duty of the staff.
5.	<i>Fiduciary duties are not understood by the board.</i>	The fiduciary duties include care, obedience and loyalty. Directors should understand their implications.
6.	<i>Lacking financial understanding.</i>	If directors don't have an understanding of finances, reports and audits, bring in a CPA or trainer. Protecting the resources is a board duty.
7.	<i>Some board members have personal agendas.</i>	Directors should be working to advance the mission and the strategic plan. It's not about the personal agenda of officers or directors. Require disclosure of conflicts of interest.
8.	<i>We have the same directors we had ten years ago!</i>	Organizations enact term limits to bring on new directors; limiting the number of years or terms.
9.	<i>Some directors are never prepared.</i>	Stress the importance of " <i>read to lead.</i> " Directors should prepare for meetings and ask questions in advance (duty of care/due diligence.)
10.	<i>We have directors who seem to be incompetent in their board service.</i>	Selection of directors should be based on competency --- not geography, who knows who, or being "out of the room when directors were selected." Provide training, information and resources. Identify the desired core competencies for the <i>board</i> before the nominating process.

Ten Reasons Strategic Plans Fail

	The Challenges	Solutions
1.	<i>The board can't think past a year or two.</i>	Most strategic plans span at least 3 years. Directors have a responsibility to "think beyond their term of office."
2.	<i>We have a host of to-do projects in our strategic plan.</i>	The plan should focus on the organization's mission, goals and strategies. It is not a to-do list. The board sets direction and then lets committees and staff/departments manage the tasks, programs and projects.
3.	<i>Maybe we had the wrong people at the planning retreat.</i>	It is the board's responsibility to develop the strategic plan. Inviting ex-officio guests, other stakeholders and a host of past presidents will slow the process. Use focus groups to collect input from outsiders, before the retreat.
4.	<i>The plan looks like a list of the directors' and officers' priorities.</i>	Most strategic plans have just 3 to 7 goals. The fewer the number of goals, the clearer the message to stakeholders.
5.	<i>We couldn't tell the difference between tactics and strategies.</i>	The terminology of planning is critical. The retreat should focus on mission, goals and strategies; adding performance measures when appropriate. Leave tactics to committees.
6.	<i>We've been developing our plan for several months.</i>	A drawn-out process can hinder development of a clear, concise plan. Most organizations schedule an 8 hour retreat conducted in one day or two half-days.
7.	<i>After the retreat the plan was ignored and put on a shelf.</i>	There are ways to ensure the plan is executed, including keeping it on the agenda and regularly reporting on progress.
8.	<i>The board wrote a plan but committees are doing their own thing.</i>	Committees should be assigned tasks from the strategic plan. Be sure every goal is supported by one or more committees.
9.	<i>I think our facilitator had his own agenda at the retreat; we didn't accomplish much.</i>	There is a broad choice of facilitators; it's important to discuss the outcomes and agree on an agenda that the board will appreciate.
10.	<i>We didn't finish the plan.</i>	Some boards get stuck on the mission; running out of time for setting goals and strategies; others get mired in tactics or side bar conversations.
11.	<i>The board says planning is too expensive.</i>	Most plans span at least three years; it is a small investment (amortized over three years) to create a compelling roadmap to follow.

Ten Challenges to Policy Adoption and Implementation

	The Challenges	Solutions
1.	<i>What's the difference between a policy and a procedure?</i>	<i>Policies</i> are the wisdom of the board documented in the minutes and a policy manual; <i>procedures</i> relate to staff duties.
2.	<i>We have an abundance of policies.</i>	An organization often relies on just 25 to 50 policies; if policies are over abundant and/or outdated, appoint a task force to review and sunset old policies.
3.	<i>Our policies have been added to the bylaws.</i>	Let the bylaws serve as a broad governing document. Policies don't belong in the bylaws.
4.	<i>The board isn't aware that we have policies.</i>	Policies are part of the governing documents to provide to board. Format policies (table of contents, annotations) for easy retrieval by volunteers and staff. The fiduciary duty of obedience requires directors understand and follow the governing documents.
5.	<i>We have policies that conflict with our bylaws.</i>	Policies may not conflict with the articles of incorporation and bylaws.
6.	<i>The policies are all over the office and have no format for a quick read.</i>	Use a template for policy adoption. Most policies are a few sentences. Include an annotation as to approval and amendment dates. All policies should be archived in a central manual or website portal for easy access by volunteers and staff.
7.	<i>I cannot find any policies, I just do things like the person before me did them.</i>	"Undocumented policies" are simply <i>precedents</i> or <i>practices</i> . To build the organization's first policy manual review prior minutes for motions and consider IRS Form 990 policy questions.
8.	<i>It takes days for staff to develop and board to debate policies.</i>	There are resources for policy development. Rely on legal counsel, accountants, and financial advisors for help.
9.	<i>The board doesn't think we need policies.</i>	Policies guide the current and future leaders. They thwart repetitive conversations about, "Should we do this or not..." if the policy already exists.
10.	<i>Should we have a policy on policy management?</i>	Organizations set a periodic date for review and ratification of existing policies; noting the action in the minutes to support duty of obedience.

Ten Challenges for Committees

	The Challenges	Solutions
1.	<i>The committees wander and don't stay focused.</i>	All committees should have a purpose statement or mission, similar to the organization.
2.	<i>Committees seem to waste time.</i>	Each committee should have work assigned annually by the board. If there is no reason to meet, postpone the meeting. Don't fulfill the adage, " <i>Committees keep minutes but waste hours!</i> "
3.	<i>Is there a preference for using task forces over standing committees?</i>	Busy volunteers would prefer to serve on a short term, single assignment task force. Standing committees are identified in the bylaws and serve the entire year.
4.	<i>They seem to be starting from scratch every year – there is no transition from last year's committees.</i>	Committees are part of a process --- the new committee builds on efforts of the prior year. Minutes and records should be maintained. Create a committee notebook to pass along or use a committee portal to archive work projects and notes.
5.	<i>Volunteers say they drove an hour both ways and when they arrived there wasn't even an agenda.</i>	A well-crafted meeting agenda is needed. Respecting the value of volunteers' time, the agenda and supporting info should be available in advance and used to complete the work at the meeting.
6.	<i>Committees are starting projects never intended!</i>	Use a board and/or staff liaison to support the committee. The liaison will also serve as the champion of the committees efforts at the board table.
7.	<i>Should committees link to the strategic plan?</i>	Committees should be aligned with the goals in the strategic plan. The plan should be introduced to the committee at the start of the year.
8.	<i>Committees have sent recommendations to the board and they revamp the proposals.</i>	When charges are clear between board and committee, the board should not recreate the work. Follow the adage, " <i>Boards don't do committee work at the board table.</i> "
9.	<i>The chairman dominates the meeting.</i>	No chairman should have a personal agenda. The role of the chair is to <i>facilitate</i> the meeting, not dominate it.
10.	<i>We only have board members on the committees.</i>	Board members are responsible for governance; some organizations recommend directors serve only as committee liaisons so as not to distract them from their duties. Expanding committee composition beyond the board is a way to engage members and bring in new ideas.