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I Survived a Year on a Committee!

Bob Harris, CAE

Last year I *cringed* when I was asked to serve on a committee. Before I said “yes,” I was determined to learn how to be a *good committee member*. You see I’ve served on committees that wasted my time, had no clear purpose and succumbed to egos and politics.

Now that my year of service has ended I can say, “I survived a year on a committee!” Let me share how I approached my committee work:

Committee Survival Tips (10)

1. **Purpose** – My first question was “What’s the purpose of the committee?” I wanted to ensure a good reason existed for our committee. (I’m in favor of eliminating or merging unnecessary committees.)
2. **Charges** – Now that I knew its purpose, I wanted to be sure the committee had received a clear work assignment. What did the incoming board chair communicate to the committee’s chair about expectations and outcomes? The clearer the charge --- the more likely our success.
3. **History** – I knew our standing committee was not new to the organization. So I asked the committee chairman about last year’s records. I wanted to know what had been accomplished and what work was pending. The staff gave us the prior “committee notebook.” It explained rationales and helped us avoid redundant discussions. We made a commitment to help future committees by taking good notes and keeping all of our drafts and minutes in a similar notebook.



I Survived a Year on a Committee!

By Eric Westover and Bob Harris, CAE

Every organization has them --- standing committees and task forces. Committees are a way to involve volunteers, benefit from their input, advance efforts and identify new leaders.

Last year I cringed when I was asked to serve on a committee. Before I said “yes,” I was determined to learn how to be a good committee member. You see I’ve served on committees that wasted my time, had no clear purpose and succumbed to egos and politics.

Now that my year of service has ended I can say, “I survived a year on a committee!” Let me share how I approached my committee work:

COMMITTEE SURVIVAL TIPS (10)

Purpose –
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Performance Measures –
At our first meeting I asked how we would measure performance. I suggested we include accountability (who, when) and quantifiability (how many, how much) to gauge progress during our term. Everyone agreed and we achieved all of our aims within the year.

Linkage –
Committees usually serve at the pleasure of the board. Thus, we asked how we would be expected to keep the board informed of our ideas and progress. Did they expect written reports? Would a board liaison attend our meetings? Would a staff member be assigned to our committee? We respected protocol by asking questions at the onset and viewing the organizational chart that showed hierarchy and information flow.

— continued on following page

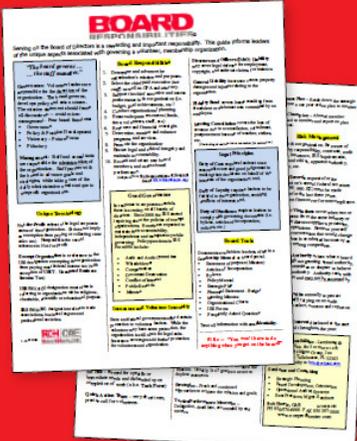
10. **Minutes and a Final Report** – We agreed to keep meeting minutes and distribute them promptly. This served as a reminder of our plans and progress. The staff appreciated receiving the minutes and shared them with the board chair to keep him apprised. At the end of the year, we assembled all the agendas, minutes and supporting documents to create a committee notebook for next year’s group.

Not all committee experiences are so positive. Use these tips to educate your committees.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.

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November 2017

Instilling a Corporate Culture

Bob Harris, CAE

I suggest that boards adopt a corporate culture to increase their impact and outcomes.

Corporate culture can be described as the beliefs and behaviors that determine how volunteers and staff interact and handle decisions. Some nonprofit boards refute the idea of corporate culture.

Association executives ask, "Are you suggesting we adopt a business model?" The answer is a resounding, "YES."

"We are nonprofit so I don't think a corporate culture would benefit us."

From the perspective of volunteer leaders I've heard some unique replies, "We are an association, not a corporation." Or, "We are nonprofit so I don't think a corporate culture would benefit us."

Working as a Business

An association is a business. I'm not the first to advise that "nonprofit" is a legal designation, not the model for volunteer behaviors.

Some directors leave their business skills at the boardroom door. They work in successful organizations, but come to the board meeting to see friends. Meetings are characterized as the "lunch bunch" or a time to share stories.

The purpose of a board is to govern. Members and stakeholders expect results.

Read the recent meeting minutes and one might ask why the board met. Agendas average a dozen reports to which the directors are forced to listen or read. For directors who arrived without preparing the most frequent phrase is, "I just have a question."

Culture Evolves

Culture settles into an organization, often without realization. Meetings planned just to meet may become the norm. Or a lack of quorum becomes the standard.

The worst characterization of a board is, "good old boys." Nobody purposely sought this reputation but it happens.

You may recognize it by looking around the board table realizing the directors don't reflect the composition of the membership.

Or you hear awkward statements like, "We've always done it that way" and "That's not how we used to do it."

Corporate Ingredients

An association's corporate culture develops organically over time from cumulative processes and behaviors. While there are precise governing documents the culture is usually silent or implied.

Some organizations consider governance to be a meeting, an agenda, reports, minutes and adjournment. These are ingredients of a board meeting but a business culture requires more.

To instill a corporate culture, include these aspects:

- **Performance** – How can leaders gauge and recognize success if performance measures are not set? Under-performing programs should be enhanced or cut; the same for committees. Report on performance through a series of dashboards to visually communicate trends, growth and gaps.
- **Strategy** – A board should be strategic, leaving the tactics to committees and staff. The board sets a multi-year roadmap. Keep the plan on the board table and report on progress at meetings.
- **Impact** – Members expect results. Does the organization have enough influence to sway decision makers and affect public policy? Members may say they are not interested in politics but nearly all of them desire a better operating climate with less regulation.
- **Brand Strength** – Corporations rely on a contemporary brand, logo, media and messaging to communicate with power. Discuss the reason for the image of the logo and if it communicates a clear, positive message.
- **Behaviors** – Leadership behaviors have an impact on the board and its outcomes. Somebody playing devil's advocate at every meeting seldom adds value. Arriving late or unprepared is unacceptable, diminishing board performance.

Ingredients of a Corporate Culture

- Performance
- Strategy
- Impact
- Brand Strength
- Behaviors
- ROI
- Principles
- Processes

- **ROI** – Corporations deliver dividends and equity. Associations should provide value or return on investment for dues paid. Do decisions of the board, and the programs and services provide enough value to sustain or grow the membership?
- **Principles** – Principles are the values developed in the organization. Values guide the discussions and decisions of the board. Be sure the board is aware and considers the stated values. They often include respect for accountability, transparency and diversity.
- **Processes** – Question why certain processes exist. How is the agenda developed? Do guests sit in or distract meetings of the board? Do reports dominate the agenda leaving little time for substantive discussions?

Changing the Culture

Few boards make time for an introspective discussion about image, behavior and results.

Start with the question, “Are we the best board possible?” “What can be improved?”

It can be a difficult conversation. They might ask, Should we be more diverse? Do board meetings produce outcomes? And, do processes and behaviors reflect good governance?

Use a self-assessment tool to guide the conversation. Consider a facilitator to advance the discussion and reach consensus for action.

Ask directors to judge their individual performance. Use their input to improve processes and meetings. For example, if they feel they are not strategic enough, find a way to weave the strategic plan into meetings.

If the board is the wrong size, decide on the right number of directors to allow for meaningful conversations. The average is 15 persons.

If the board meets too frequently discuss an agenda that advances business for at least 90 days. With technology and the authority of an executive committee, work can be accomplished in between duly called meetings.

If there are too many reports to digest, implement a consent agenda process to reduce time spent reading and listening. Directors will have to make time to read before

BOARD EVALUATION		Very comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Very uncomfortable	Not Sure N/A
Board evaluation is an approach to improving governance --- with the intent to maintain a high performing board. The chief elected officer (not staff) leads the process. Input will be treated with confidence.						
Indicate your understanding of and offer recommendations for these governance aspects.						
Mission and Strategic Direction						
1. Board efforts advance the mission, vision, values and goals.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
2. The strategic plan portrays an image of the organization in 3, 5 or 10 years.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
3. Meetings and agendas are organized to achieve the mission and goals (and avoid operating matters.)	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Comments:						
Governing Documents						
4. Board understands and upholds all governing documents.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
5. Policies are adopted and followed to guide current and future leaders.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Comments:						
Leadership, Succession and Transparency						
6. Board selection process is transparent and ensures leadership succession.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
7. Board orientation and self-assessment is sufficient.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
8. New ideas and people are respected.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
Comments:						
Budgeting, Finance and Infrastructure						
9. Board adopts annual budget and is engaged in monitoring finances.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
10. Reserves/savings and investment strategies are appropriate.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
11. Financial reports are clear, accurate and timely.	<input type="checkbox"/>					
12. Annual audit and auditor's recommendations are reviewed.	<input type="checkbox"/>					

meetings.

Through honest self-evaluation, introspection and a commitment to be the best, business principles can become the norm.

Trustee Roles

Directors should understand they are trustees of a corporation. The membership has entrusted them with resources to advance the mission and goals.

Board members are to perform their duties in accordance with corporate laws and the governing documents.

Most directors have the business skills necessary for good governance. They should ensure this board strives to be a model of excellence.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free association governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com

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November 2017

A Legacy of Association Leadership

Bob Harris, CAE

I met Dr. Richard McDonald after his death. I have been honored to teach at the Richard McDonald Leadership Institute offered by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

McDonald worked at the Texas Cattle Feeders Association for 32 years. He retired in 2006 after a distinguished career of service to the cattle industry. Among colleagues, industry and professionals he was recognized for his successes.

NCBA administers the Richard McDonald Leadership Institute. During his career he offered guidance for the development of strong state organizations. Based on his leadership the Institute was developed to benefit cattle and beef marketing associations.

His advice was captured through a videotape offering perspectives of success in an association. The video is played at the Cattle Industry Summer Business Meeting each summer. His words ring true for association leadership now as much as they did when the video was produced in 2010.

Through his perspectives association executives and volunteer leaders continue to benefit from his advice.



Association Advice

This is a summary of his advice paraphrased from the video (RM). Below each topic I've added my own perspectives (BH).

What makes a good association executive?

RM: The role of an executive director is not to be friends with the board but to advance the goals of the association the organization.

BH: The mission is the purpose for existence. Nearly every discussion and decision by the board and staff should be framed by the statement. It takes a board-staff partnership to achieve results. At the conclusion of every meeting directors should ask, “Did we advance our mission?”

Balanced roles of board and staff.

RM: Board members are there to govern and establish policy. The officers and committees should allow the staff to do the day to day management. There should not be a need to ask the board for permission to buy a computer when it was already in the budget, for instance.

BH: If the board will establish policy and a budget, the executive director should have authority to act without asking for permission. The board sets the destination and the staff will find the most efficient means to reach it.



Why committees are important.

RM: Committees help the larger board. Avoid the need for a board to make every decision by appointing effective committees. Get at least one “junkyard dog” on the finance committee. Be sure the committees understand their purposes and the board respects the committees.

BH: Committees can benefit the board and staff, or waste their time. Be sure each has a clear purpose. Discourage the board from doing committee work at the board table.

Symptoms of weak governance.

RM: Officers should not make decisions that have not been approved by the board. You don’t want directors to do their own thing without the approval of the board. It’s not about personal desires of any one director. There should be an officer orientation so they understand their roles and the board staff relationship.

BH: Orientation of the board should occur annually. It refreshes directors on their responsibilities, understanding of the financial resources, and awareness of possible risks. The adage rings true, “The board governs and the staff manage.”

Without consensus there will be trouble.

RM: When you don't have consensus and there is good reason, postpone the decision. One can expect a few dissenting votes, but a split of 14 to 16 would cause internal strife. As often as possible strive for consensus for a smooth running association.

BH: Decisions of the board should be considered unanimous. After meetings directors may be asked about meeting outcomes and they should always reply, "I support the decisions of the board." Any opposing statement should be made inside the board meeting, not after the meeting.

Do your homework and prepare the board.

RM: Give the board good information in a brief format. For example a single page of bulleted information is more likely to be read and understood. By giving directors too much information it is subject to interpretation. Avoid reams of paper when bullets will suffice.

BH: Seldom does a volunteer have time to read past page two of a document without interruptions. If directors want more information, make it available, but start with brevity to increase understanding. Even a strategic plan can be reduced to the size of a business card.

The Amarillo Area Foundation administers the Institute. NCBA plans the annual summer training.

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Diversity of Leadership

Bob Harris, CAE

The executive explained, “The average age of my board is 55. The directors are all women. Admittedly the profession we represent is characterized as women, but there are men in the industry, too. We don’t have term limits so I don’t see any chance for developing a board that adds men or represents the diversity of our membership.”

Another executive said, “Our problem is the same board members continue to serve. One might think it is a good problem to have but it feels like the current directors are blocking others from joining the board.”

I suggested term limits but he countered, “Our bylaws prescribe a maximum of two terms – followed by a year off the board. But the directors who come off are eagerly waiting to rejoin the board for another two terms.”

Embrace Board Diversity

A frequent question of executives: “How do we add diversity to a board that likes being who they are?”

Diversity means different things to different people. It can be difficult to discuss. Often a board member states, “We tried once and it was unproductive.”

The dictionary describes diversity as the condition of having or being composed of differing elements, especially the inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization.

One of the worst labels a board can acquire is, “Good old boys.” Often the characterization is oblivious to the board. Seldom do boards look inward to discuss their image from the outside.

Diversity in an association could be represented by age, generations, business models, geographic locale, practice setting, ethnicity, religion, preferences and more. When the conversation is difficult, there are professionals who can guide the board to appropriate action.

Dresden Farrand, MPA, MPP, CAE, Vice President of Chapter Development at the **Independent Electrical Contractors, Inc.** (IEC) offers, “Associations should reflect the society in which they operate. For a board to truly adopt diversity it must appreciate its

meaning. The opportunity to evolve from understanding to practicing the principles is key. Without a board driven directive the initiatives will not be sustained.”

If an association does not respect diversity they may unknowingly create an opening for the development of a competing group. It might start as an informal social media page and evolve into a new association embracing the under-represented membership.

Practices

Core Beliefs – Examine the values that guide the organization, they frame decisions by the leadership. Core beliefs might include diversity, respect, transparency, integrity and accountability. Discuss their importance and understanding with the leadership.

Demographics – Study the composition of the membership and the community (including prospective members.) Analyze the demographics to identify populations that can be better engaged and served.

Programs and Services – Different populations have different needs. Are events, programs and services perceived as inclusive or exclusive? Do barriers exist, such as language, access or understanding? Conduct marketing with consideration of diversity.

Forums – Consider a forum, roundtable or program that embraces diversity within the community. For example, the American Society of Association Executives offers the “Diversity Executive Leadership Program,” DELP. It connects individuals from under-represented. Many organizations involve younger members with an emerging professionals’ network.

Board Buddies – Ask directors to escort a prospective leader to an event or board meeting. Reach out to persons desired for inclusion but absent in the association.

Opportunity – Create opportunities to include new persons. Rotate board meetings to varied settings and invite or visit members. Ask potential leaders to observe the board in action and to share their perspectives.

Term Limits – Most associations prescribe two terms before a director must step aside. Agree that two terms is sufficient time to advance the mission and goals so others may step up.

Committees – Just as the board should reflect diversity, so too should committees. Appoint persons representing all segments of the association to volunteer workgroups.

Mentor – Sometimes all it takes to draw out a new leader is to ask, “Have you considered a leadership role?” Encourage seasoned directors to guide new leaders through mentoring, especially from under-represented sectors.

Designated Seats – Some organizations ensure diversity by designating one or more board seats to a desired category of the membership. While this guarantees diversity in composition, be cautious about adding persons who think they serve only to represent a certain perspective; and think twice before enlarging the board.

Nominations – Ensure that the nominating committee represents and respects diversity in recommending leaders.

Changing the image of a non-diverse well-entrenched board might take some open and frank discussions. The outcome will support a healthy association. Be sure to enlist the aid of professionals in this topic.

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Do We *Really* Need A Strategic Plan?

Bob Harris, CAE

The newly elected president walked into the executive director's office to discuss the year ahead. He brought a notepad filled with 13 projects to achieve before his term ends.

How might the executive respond?

Start by thanking him for sharing his priorities. Follow that with, "Let's look at our strategic plan to see how your projects fit." The aim is to show that his interests might already be part of the strategic plan or to discuss how they can fit.

If they don't align the discussion might ensue, "What should we adjust in our existing plan to integrate your goals so as not to exhaust our resources?" The conversation would benefit by including the executive officers.

The approach shows the importance of a strategic plan to guide the association through successive leadership, avoiding year to year distractions.

Strategic Planning is NOT Dead

You might have heard, "Strategic planning is dead." The statement is not meant to for associations to abandon planning. Simply the processes and outcomes have evolved.

Planning retreats are opportunities for directors to consider the future. It is different from board meetings where attention is generally focused on the current year.

Planning that used to take months or weeks can be done in less than a day with proper preparations. Reports that were 20 to 100 pages have been pared down to a page or two. Rather than starting anew at every retreat, boards have realized it's smart to build upon the prior plan.

Terminology has changed. Strategic drivers might be set to frame decision making. Mission and vision statements have been combined. A plan champion or Sherpa may be appointed to monitor and report on progress. Staff track progress on a program of work.

Association GPS

The plan sets a destination and describes a roadmap. Consider it the organization's guiding GPS – goals, priorities and strategies.

The road map should be the primary guide for board, committees and staff. When proposals are made, directors should question, "Why are we talking about this if it is not in our plan?"

Staff Rely on a Plan

Several association executives offered perspectives on planning:

There is an old adage, "If you don't know where you are going any road will get you there." The strategic plan is our road map which, when properly used, will focus and prioritize the financial and human resources to meet significant goals and objectives, explains Glenn East, CAE and executive director at the **Northeast Florida Association of REALTORS®**.

At the **Retail Association of Maine**, CEO and CAE Curtis Picard says, "Having a strategic plan with 3 to 5 clear goals enabled us to focus our limited resources on the things that matter. While it is sometimes easy to say yes to an idea, the strategic plan gave us the criteria to determine if it was mission critical or not. Finally, the plan made our board meetings run much more smoothly once we centered the agenda on the specific goals."

Erica Huffman, CEO at the **Escambia County Medical Society** avows, "Having a strategic plan gives the association a sense of direction. It is a road map and without it, it is easy to get lost among the variety of task and projects the association manages."

Charlene Wandzilak, executive director at the **Pennsylvania Veterinary Medical Association** offers, "Having a strategic plan which is referred to regularly and monitored for progress helps provide a vital road map for times when the organization wants to overcommit itself and not focus on its true purpose or tries to be all things to all people. It also provides direction on where to focus resources, energy, time and effort to make the most impact for our members and our organization's overall success."

The **San Diego County Dental Society's** executive Michael Koonce, CAE says, "The plan is our primary guide. It's our association's mandate on what it is we want to accomplish and our staff's marching orders on where and how to focus our time. If done right, it's also the measure of whether or not we are successful. I can't imagine working without one."

Overcoming Objections

Some boards refute the value of planning. The most common reason, “We just don’t have time for a retreat.”

Planning retreats got a bad rap because they began with games, trust-falls, and group hugs. Directors roll their eyes when they are told to stand up and pick a partner.

Some directors dislike having a plan because they prefer to offer suggestions at will. Without goals to frame board work, the discussions fall to the latest crisis, personal priorities or the “good ideas” tossed on the board table.

Another objection is cost. Hosting a retreat and compensating a facilitator requires a budget. If the price seems high, remember most plans are for three years or longer – amortize the amount over three years and it’s a small cost for a roadmap.

When the board says we don’t need a plan, use this rationale:

- Planning retreats require an investment of time, though an effective plan can be developed with advance work in under a day.
- A plan lends support to advocacy. The description of the organization and its priorities demonstrates how the organization benefits the community and society.
- A plan should always be on the board table. Transform the plan into a placemat format, laminate it, and keep it front and center at meetings. As ideas are offered, check how they fit in the plan or what must be adjusted to accommodate a new program.
- The plan is integral to membership recruitment and renewal. It should answer, “Why belong?” Members should know of the organization’s goals and strategies.
- Incoming directors should ask, “Where is the strategic plan, our job is to advance it.” Directors offering “good ideas” or hoping to leave a legacy is counter-productive.
- Staff rely on the plan to align work with board priorities. A staff developed business plan supports the board’s strategic plan.
- Committees need to be familiar with the plan so their work can advance its elements.

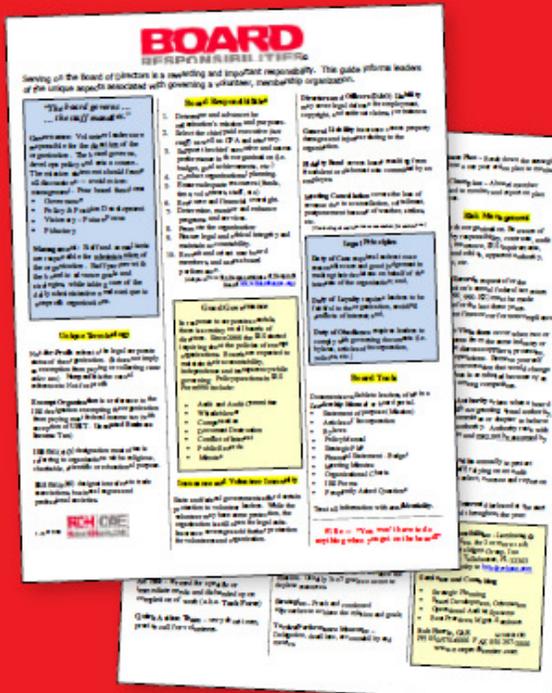
- The plan tracks progress and performance. Without a plan efforts may go in any direction.
- The plan is as important as the governing documents and budget; directors should read them all to fulfill fiduciary duties.
- The planning retreat is not just about adding new ideas; it is a time to evaluate programs and *drop* what has low relevance.

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