Reflections from a Board Member

By STEPHANIE ROTH

I have experienced the complexities of boards from many angles and perspectives — as a staff member, board member, and consultant/trainer. Although I've probably spent as much time over the past 20 years consulting with organizations on how to strengthen their boards as I have serving on them, it is my experiences as a board member that have led me to write this article.

Most people involved with nonprofits know how difficult it is to find a well-functioning board. An exercise I've borrowed from consultant/trainer Burke Keegan asks participants to brainstorm qualities of "the board from hell." Whether the group I'm working with is made up primarily of staff people *or* board members, this exercise never fails to get a laugh as well as produce pages of problems they've experienced with their organization's board.

More and more people in nonprofit organizations are starting to question the very structure of boards, whereby a group of volunteers who do not have day-to-day involvement with the work of an organization nevertheless have ultimate legal responsibility for what it does. But until a new and better model is created, we need to figure out ways to make the experience of being on a board of directors a more fruitful and satisfying — not to mention useful — one.

Over all my years working with them, I have tried to convince both board and staff people that fundraising is an essential part of a board member's responsibilities. When people have said to me, "But we're not a fundraising board," my response has been, "Then you're not a very effective one either, because fundraising is an important responsibility of any nonprofit board." I say this not just because the money itself is critical to the survival of the organization, but also because of the close relationship between fundraising and other programmatic work. Fundraising, like program work, builds new constituencies and involves members, volunteers, and leaders in making the work more visible, as well as recruiting new interest in and sources of support for the organization. When board members ask their friends, family, colleagues, and neighbors to make a contribution, attend a special event, or purchase a raffle ticket, they are bringing in potential new allies and activists to the cause.

While I still believe that there is a vital connection between fundraising and program work, I've also seen situations where board members feel that fundraising is the *only* thing the staff wants them to work on, and have felt that their role in program, governance, and strategic thinking and planning is not considered essential or even particularly desirable. This attitude reinforces a dangerous separation of fundraising from programmatic work, hindering everybody's efforts on behalf of the organization. Ideally, everyone should be involved in both fundraising and programmatic work as the way to best advance the goals of the organization. Board members are far more effective in raising money if they are committed, passionate, and *involved* with the organization's work.

As a professional fundraising consultant, I was surprised to find myself on a board where the staff had high expectations of my work raising money for the organization, but did not want me to ask any questions about fundraising strategies, the financial growth of the organization, or how decisions about budget and fundraising were made. I realized that without being involved in developing the

fundraising plan and in analyzing the effectiveness of past efforts, I was not as motivated to carry out fundraising tasks. Also, in order to maintain my enthusiasm for asking people for money, I needed to be part of the discussions about how our programs were making a difference in the world — how effective they were at stopping sexism, or challenging racism, or ending violence against gay men and lesbians, or halting environmental devastation from corporate polluters.

I realize that my background in fundraising and non-profit management is not the typical board member's experience, and I'm happy to bring my experience in those areas to causes I care most about. But, like other people, I join boards to learn something new and to gain new skills as well as to use my existing ones. Board members want to engage in the analysis that will inform how the organization does business this year and in the years to come. They want to have opportunities to participate in national conferences and other activities to learn more about the issues and, ultimately, to become stronger advocates for the organization and its cause.

Because of experiences like mine, board members are becoming frustrated with the problems of serving on a board. One board member complained to me that the actual work of being on the board was totally different from what he had expected, and that he didn't like it very much. Most of his time was spent talking about personnel matters, by-law revisions, recruitment of new board members, and fundraising. His enthusiasm about the actual work of the organization had waned as his input or involvement on a programmatic level was discouraged by the executive director and limited to staff reports given at board meetings.

People join boards because they care about the cause and want to give their time and money to something they believe in deeply. Too often, however, their actual experience of being on the board consists of long meetings devoted mainly to administrative details, crisis management around personnel or funding problems, and being told endlessly that they aren't raising enough money.

On the other side of the board/staff dynamic, staff people often view board meetings as a necessary downside to their job responsibilities. From their vantage point, the meetings take a lot of time to prepare for and only lead to more work from the demands that board members make of them. I recently met with the executive director of an organization on whose board I had previously served. She wanted my advice about how she could strengthen the board and develop a better working relationship with its members. At one point in the meeting I said, "Please be completely honest with me. Do you find the board of directors to be mostly a burden, a group you have endless obligation to, but that you get very little back from?" She confessed that was how she felt much of the time.

A CHALLENGE

I'd like to pose a challenge to my colleagues who serve on the boards of organizations they care deeply about, and to the staff members we work closely with: Let's create ways to have a true partnership where each member of an organization — staff, board, client/consumer, member — has an important role to play in furthering the mission.

It's true that some board members may become too involved in what is appropriately the work of the staff and fail to recognize when they have begun to try to micro-manage these activities. Most board members, however, have neither the time nor inclination to work at this intimate a level. Nevertheless, an organization must guard against micromanaging by board members by clarifying the difference between the job of the board members and that of staff. For any organization, the exact responsibilities of board and staff will depend on the size of the organization, its stage of development, number of staff people, and other factors. At the same time, staff and board members must find meaningful and appropriate ways to involve board members in an organization's programmatic work. Without an appreciation for their desire and ability to be more than fundraising machines, crisis managers, and names on a letterhead, organizations will have a harder and harder time finding committed, skilled, and enthusiastic people to serve on boards.

HOW CAN WE BEGIN?

The reality of running a nonprofit organization is that everyone — board members, executive directors, and other management staff — feels beleaguered by having to do too much administrative and fundraising work. They resent how little time is left for the work that drew them to the organization in the first place. But it costs more to run a nonprofit today than a decade ago because of more expensive technology (computers, fax machines, etc.) and increased competition for less funding. Government cutbacks since 1980 have meant less money from those funding sources while competition grows from an expanding number of nonprofits for private-sector funds. While more money in absolute dollars is being donated by the private sector every year, this growth has not made up for the loss of funds from government sources.

I have two suggestions for ways to cope with this very real problem. First, be clear with *all* members of the

organization that fundraising *is* part of the work, not some thankless task that allows others to do the "real" work. Through fundraising we involve people who are vitally interested in the mission of our organizations; and fundraising gives us the chance to have interesting, even challenging conversations with a broad range of people who want to make the world a better place through their financial support of our work.

Second, *all* members of the organization need to participate in serious discussions about what's happening in the field, how our organizations should respond to changes in the larger society that affect our work, and even what kinds of new program areas the organization should consider. These discussions should welcome the perspectives of board, staff, volunteers, and other constituents.

One way is for organizations to hold an annual board-staff retreat to give themselves the time to have more open-ended and thoughtful discussions. Another way is to schedule time at each board meeting to reflect on these issues. Don't let the "business" part of the work overwhelm the commitment people have to the mission of your organization.

Being a board member can be a thankless job if it does not offer the right balance of hard work (including fundraising), productive and meaningful discussions about important issues, and respect for board members' varied contributions. When this balance is achieved, being a board member can produce huge rewards for both the organization and the individual.

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