

BOARD GOVERNANCE AND SUPPORT

Explanation of Board Responsibilities

Responsibilities of nonprofit boards are of two fundamental types: governance and support. On one hand, the board, acting as the formal representative of the public, governs and provides oversight to the organization's affairs. At the same time, board members as individuals support the organization by volunteering, raising money, and advising when asked to do so by the board or the paid staff.

GOVERNANCE

The board acts to GOVERN the organization, that is, to ensure that the member's interests are represented within the organization. These governing responsibilities include:

- Determining mission and purpose, and overall strategies, policies and priorities
- Monitoring program performance and impact
- Overseeing compliance with laws and regulations and fulfillment of contractual obligations
- Safeguarding assets from misuse, and ensuring maximum use of resources
- Financial oversight
- Selecting/monitoring/evaluating and terminating staff
- Approving a fundraising strategy and monitoring its effectiveness

These governing responsibilities are performed by the board **as a body or group**: for example, while the board hires and evaluates staff, the board chairperson or any other board member does not have the same authority as a supervisor has over a subordinate. Instead, the board president acts as a convener and facilitator for the board, which as a group provides feedback and direction to staff.

When acting in its governing role, the board represents the interests of the membership. It asks: Is this organization using public and private resources to benefit the membership and the associated public? In a sense, the board stands outside the organization, looking through the door into the organization. But at the same time, board members also represent the organization's interests to the membership—acting as ambassadors to the membership and the community.

SUPPORT

The board members—acting as individuals—work to **SUPPORT** the organization by contributing to the organization's fundraising success as appropriate to the individual such as making a financial contribution, volunteering at fundraising events, making business contacts for the organization, soliciting cash and non-cash contributions, etc.

- Assisting staff in raising funds
- Acting as ambassadors to the membership on behalf of the organization and its clients
- Volunteering and volunteer recruitment

- Advising staff in areas of personal expertise, act as a sounding board for the executive director and other paid staff when invited and encouraged to do so

These supporting activities are performed by board members acting as individuals. As a result, there are two types of role-switching that go on. On one hand, the board acting as a group is “the boss in charge” when determining overall organizational strategy, but as individuals, board members act to support staff in the implementation of that strategy, for example, by calling a list of donors given to them by staff.

In organizations with paid staff, there are times when the board acts in its governing role—“the boss and in charge”—and other times when individual board members act to support the staff. Boards and staff often get confused over these differences. For example, in many boards there is tension over whether and how the board should be involved with fundraising. This tension can be cleared up understanding the following:

In its governing role, the board—**acting as a body [singular]**—is responsible for seeing that there is a realistic plan for managing the organization, and for monitoring progress on the plan. This plan might include fundraised (contributed) dollars, collection of fees, interest income from investments, foundation grants, the sale of books, services and or other resources, and so forth. The board is responsible to insure that there is an appropriate plan. This is a governance responsibility—one in which the board acts as the “boss” and provides oversight of the staff-developed plan.

In the support role, the board members as individuals also help carry out that plan. In this role, they often act with direction from staff. For example, staff might generate a list of people who need to be called for an upcoming event, and distribute those names among the board members who have volunteered to do so. In this kind of work, the staff organizes and is responsible for the work, and delegates it to board members acting as individual volunteers.

It is imperative that board members are able to distinguish between the board’s governing role and the board members’ supporting role.

Using the aforementioned approach—based on an understanding of board governance—can often clear up confusing and frustrating situations and discussions.