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What is Wrong with my Board?

Ask a dozen association and chamber executives, “What’s wrong with your board?” and each has a story to share. The group offered frank examples of what’s wrong in hopes of improving board performance. The list is categorized by leadership selection, governance structure and board behavior.

The function of a board is to advance a mission, serve members and improve communities. Dysfunction detracts from success.

Solutions to most of the challenges can be addressed through governance and structural reviews, nomination processes, and board orientation.

Selection – Refers to how leaders are identified, vetted and trained.

Leadership Path	We have no mechanisms to develop leaders. Committees are idle so there is no leadership development. We discussed creating a leadership academy or young professionals’ network.
Nominations	The committee is composed entirely of past presidents. They submit a list (without vetting the candidates for qualifications) and we don’t see them again.
Qualifications	We are filling board seats based on geography and chapters to promote “representation.” The board should be populated with volunteers who are competent in governance.
Recycling	We don’t have enough candidates for the open seats. We are “recycling” board members. The millennial member say they have don’t have time or desire to serve.
Training	We conduct board orientation at least every three years but most of the directors don’t attend.

Structure – Refers to organizational governance structure.

Agendas	The board chair offers no input as to what should be on the agenda. The agendas have looked the same for a decade.
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Board Size	We have 40 board members. Many don't show up, assuming their absence won't be noticed. Some say the board's size is intimidating.
Organizational Chart	Board members ignore the lines of communication depicted in the organizational chart. Some go around the executive director to tell staff what to do.
Consent Agenda	The board agreed to use a consent agenda. The problem is the committees don't provide reports. For those provided, it is apparent from director questions they did not read the reports.
Executive Committee	The officers meet before every board meeting to make decisions and then present them to the board for ratification. Some directors asked if there is a need for a board if the executive committee decides everything.
Frequency	The board meets monthly with minimal results. Volunteers are reluctant to join the board because of the frequency.
Guests	The bylaws prescribe several seats be held by persons who serve or have served in other positions, for example multiple past presidents. Most the time they don't attend. The candidness of discussions changes when guests drop in.
Layers	The bylaws authorize a finance committee. The problem is the finance committee usurps the authority of the board, holding them hostage by limiting funds. In another instance, the board is overshadowed by a house of delegates charged with making policy and positions.
Quorums	Several meetings drew less than a quorum. We had to loosely define a quorum as only 35 percent of the board so we could conduct business.
Room Set Up	Sometimes the board room is set up in half rounds and at other times we use a hollow square. Our conference room is cramped and directors are uncomfortable. The set up hinders meaningful conversations.
Strategic Plan	The strategic plan is collecting dust. How can we keep the plan front and center to serve as the board's roadmap?
Term Limits	Some directors have been on the board forever. When the idea of term limits arose they were quick to say there is no need.

Time Management Our meetings last longer than the scheduled agenda. Directors like to chat, listen to and read reports. When the meeting adjourns directors stand outside the office rehashing the meeting. Who should keep the meeting on schedule and board focused?

Behavior – Refers to performance of individuals and the board of directors.

Absence Our bylaws offer directors “two excused meetings.” They seem to treat these as “passes” to get out of meetings.

Accountability Directors volunteer but don’t follow through. The chair of the board doesn’t want to call them out. We wish officers would uphold accountability.

Arson We have an arsonist on the board. Every sentence begins, “I’ll play the devil’s advocate.” He doesn’t offer solutions. He’s the first to send emails after the meeting criticizing decisions.

Confidentiality We advise that discussions and documents should be treated with confidentiality. There are directors who improperly infer they speak for the organization. Others readily share confidential documents.

Conflicts Some directors appear to have personal agendas. Shouldn’t potential conflicts be disclosed at board meetings?

Discipline We have directors who ignore the agenda, bringing new ideas to every meeting. They don’t grasp that the board’s agenda and strategic plan should guide initiatives.

Diversity The board has dismissed the worthy ideas offered by new directors, or made disparaging remarks about members who are “different.” The board doesn’t represent the diversity of the membership.

Energy Volunteers come on strong, after a few months some lose interest. A couple of directors we’ve never met.

Engagement Once directors leave meetings they don’t give the organization much consideration until the next meeting.

Fiduciaries Directors think “fiduciary” means fund raising. They don’t relate to the duties of care, loyalty and obedience in their fiduciary roles.

Micromanagement	There are directors who focus on staffing and operations rather than adhering to governance roles.
Outcomes	We expect significant results from the board's efforts. But directors seem more focused on this month's project or what's for lunch.
Politics	Directors have said, "we don't take sides and shouldn't be in politics." They confuse good public policy with politics.
Read to Lead	We provide a leadership manual but several leave it behind. I doubt they read the bylaws, let alone the policies, budget and strategic plan.
Reserves	We have significant savings but the board won't spend them on new programs or technology, rationalizing they are waiting for a "rainy day."
Secrecy	Executive sessions are called, excusing members, staff and guests. The board doesn't consider transparency and the staff is left in the dark.
Tactics	Discussions drop to tactics where they rehash committee work at the board table. Some find it easier to discuss tactics than strategy and vision.
Unity	Directors do not act as a team. After meetings several directors speak against board actions.
Vision	Directors don't think beyond their terms of office. We need directors who focus on the future, considering a vision of three to five years at least.
Zealous	A few directors see their term as a sprint rather than a marathon. They burn out before their term ends.

The executives shared some of their most discouraging scenarios. Most challenges can be resolved through a commitment to improving processes, adapting the structure and training. In reality, America's 1.5 million nonprofit boards make significant contributions to their causes and communities.

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