

Choosing the Right Board Members

Aligned Influence™

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The board of a local non-profit has just been through a significant season of reflection and engagement about their role as the board. They significantly matured their understanding of their responsibilities and established structured processes to ensure that they improve. Now they face another reality. They may not have the right people on their board. Who would be the right board member? How do they find them?

These are significant questions and are answerable only by returning to the foundational descriptions of the roles of the board and the executive as described in the “Aligned Influence™” model. The model indicates that the role of the board is to direct, protect and enable; and the role of the executive is to lead, manage and accomplish the work of the organization. So who is the right board member? One who is equipped to direct without leading the organization, to protect without managing the organization and to enable without accomplishing the work of the organization.

Direct rather than Lead

The board directs the organization; to determine what service, product or value is to be delivered; what population is to be served; and what ideals are to be maintained by the organization. Notice the repetition of the word “what”. Directing is about determining what the organization should accomplish, in contrast to leading which is determining how the organization should accomplish it. Both are critical, but it is the board’s particular role to be dedicated to, even disciplined to, determining, clearly communicating and ensuring adherence of the organization to the accomplishment of that outcome.

Directing requires many of the same qualities in a board member that one might seek in a leader; the ability to initiate, influence, inspire, listen and communicate. The key difference is that successful board members also have the ability to discipline themselves by limiting their activities to determining, evaluating and planning what the organization should accomplish rather than how the organization should accomplish it. The board member understands that their own experience as a leader in

other situations can be a valuable resource and help for the director, as long as they keep focused on the fulfillment of their role as a board member.

Protect rather than Manage

The board protects the organization by establishing and monitoring operational boundaries that the executive is expected to respect and comply with. In doing so, the board provides boundaries within which the executive can establish operational policy and process to ensure that the work of the organization is accomplished safely and with integrity. Board members utilize their own experience as managers to establish and monitor appropriate operational boundaries, while never crossing over into the executive’s role.

Again, protecting requires many of the same qualities in a board member that the executive needs to manage. Adequate business acumen and experience are essential to understand the language of financial, human resource, risk management and compensation issues. The board member must understand the value of process, control and documentation. They must be able to communicate both in writing and interpersonally; structuring concise messages with the appropriate audience in mind. They must understand the important empowering role of a supervisor, with the ability to provide feedback and encouragement equally well. The board member must be skilled enough to manage these kinds of administrative issues, but willing to discipline themselves to their role of creating and monitoring boundaries, which allow the executive to manage well.

They should also understand that even if they disagree with a particular tactic the executive chooses, they will refrain from criticizing the choice unless it compromises one of the operational boundaries established by the board.

Enable rather than Accomplish

The board enables the organization by advocating and assisting in resource development, which enables the executive to accomplish the work of the organization. The board member assists in resource development by extending their personal, professional and civic advocacy relationships into development relationships. Therefore, a key quality of a board member is one who has significant established relationships and the ability to create more. Relationship builders tend to be outwardly focused. They are energized by relationships and are motivated to create more. Advocacy is

extended to resource development by being sensitive to alignment between the needs and opportunities of the organization with the talents and resources of those with whom the board member has relationships. The successful board member will be genuinely interested, even passionate, about enabling the organization to accomplish its mission; proactively seeking out the needs and opportunities of the organization, and the talents and resources of those with whom they have relationships. Board members with this quality perceive everyone to be a winner when such an alignment is discovered.

It is at this point in the discussion that I usually get the question, "Why haven't you reminded us that the key quality in a board member is that they meet some level of personal financial support for the organization?" Many boards do choose board members because of their ability to provide resources to the organization. While it may be the happy circumstance that someone who has the ability to provide significant resources also excels at directing, protecting and enabling the organization, in many cases that is not true and such organizations are burdened with a board of directors that write checks but do little else to enable the organization to accomplish its mission.

The questions being asked by the local non-profit described at the beginning of this article were, "Who would be the right board members, and how do we find them?" In short, the answer seems to be someone who has the ability to lead, manage and accomplish the work of the organization; but has the self-discipline to use that ability to direct, protect and enable. The more extensive answer would indicate that the one who can direct would be able to initiate, influence, inspire, listen and communicate. The one who can protect would have business acumen and experience; value process, control and documentation; communicate well in writing and interpersonally; and provide feedback and encouragement equally well. The one who can enable will be outgoing, value relationships, have a genuine passion for the work of the organization and perceive everyone as a winner when the needs and opportunities of the organization are aligned with the talents and resources of another.

So where will they find these super humans? To be sure, these are unique people, but they exist in your community today. They will be found where other business people are gathered socially. Attend

community leadership meetings, chamber of commerce meetings, and civic leadership meetings. Tell everyone you know that you are looking for such super people; you will be surprised how many referrals you get. The right individuals will be intrigued when you tell them that you are looking for a few good people who can inspire, initiate, influence, communicate, build relationships and passionately enable the mission of your organization. You will attract these people by having your own organizational house in order. They will not be very satisfied sitting through an unorganized, disjointed board meeting. They will be looking for a place where they can make a difference. And you will offer them that opportunity with a clearly defined role, and a clearly defined and organized set of board policies, processes, calendars and agendas. Once you have a few of these new breed of board members, you will notice that their relationships will attract others with the same qualities to your board.

Aligned Influence, LLC specializes in helping organizations establish clear roles for the Board and staff of organizations, and then provides the tools by which to operate within the roles so your organization can focus on its mission rather than its organization. If we can assist you further, please visit us at www.alignedinfluence.com or contact us at 303-257-1794.