



5 Ways Your Board Can Enhance Your Nonprofit's Mission Outcomes

by Kathy Bremer

Is the board helping, or inhibiting, your nonprofit's ability to deliver strong program results? Conventional wisdom says mission delivery is the province of staff. But exceptional boards engage in ways that are literally game-changing for mission outcomes.

Far from taking program impact for granted, exceptional Boards **focus** on it. They impact mission outcomes through:

- 1. Own the Mission and the Vision**
- 2. Promote Strategic Thinking and Planning**
- 3. Support a Positive Work Environment**
- 4. Open, Generative Discussion and Debate**
- 5. Peer-to-Peer Accountability**

The first way boards ensure impact is by:

1. Owning the mission and vision

For board members, passion for the mission is necessary but insufficient. Board members need to take ownership of the vision and mission outcomes.

Part of this is getting personally engaged with the mission, by touching it and experiencing its impact. Ideally, each board member can find a "sweet spot" related to the mission. It could be anything – volunteering to build houses or serve in the shelter, working side-by-side with staff, immersing one's self in the cultural offerings or sharing stories of program impact with potential donors.

(Note: every board member's to-do list also includes being an ambassador and helping to build awareness, engagement and financial support.)

Here are 3 examples of boards that have engaged their members more deeply on the mission front:

- A national nonprofit whose mission was sports-related had met for years in the same hotel basement. The new board chair moved the meetings to field

locations—including a sports research institute in Chicago, Nike headquarters in Portland and USAA Track & Field trials in California. Board meetings became more substantive and the board got energized. As a side benefit, Board giving rose 10-fold that year.

- A human service nonprofit's board made time each meeting for a presentation from frontline program staff or a program beneficiary. The result: deeper engagement with program outcomes and an inspiring story for board members to tell after each meeting.
- A theater board invited cast members in to give 3 minute soliloquies on scenes from plays currently being produced. The result: more excitement, more attendance and friend-raising.

Owning the mission goes deeper than knowing the stories. Board members need to understand their nonprofit's "theory of change." What is the problem to be solved? What are the drivers of impact? What does success look like? What is the sustainable business model?

After taking time to analyze these factors, one board realized that securing internships was a key economic driver and a program necessity. Several members took on the challenge of opening doors to companies who could host the nonprofit's interns.

By owning and deeply understanding the mission, the board is equipped to ask the right questions--the kind of questions that stimulate discussion and innovation. One board's skepticism resulted in a breakthrough. In the CEO's words:

- "I was all fired up about adding a certain service. To me, the decision was a no-brainer. But the board had questions: Do we have the right internal skill sets? Is there an alternate way to provide the service, other than building our own capacity? I was challenged to get additional data to inform the decision. In doing that, I ran across a much better approach to fulfilling that need—an exciting, win-win partnership that has worked out wonderfully for us. That's a board at its best—asking the right questions, almost like a consultant, and being a true partner in advancing the mission."

Mission focus keeps the main thing the main thing.

The second way boards ensure impact is by:

2. Promoting strategic thinking and planning

In every survey BoardWalk does with CEOs, they cite “getting the board to be more strategic” as a top challenge. The board and senior staff should hold at minimum an annual retreat to talk about the big issues and do visioning and planning. A good planning process creates a shared view of the organization’s strengths, weaknesses and opportunities and commitment to a finite and clear set of aspirations, priorities and actions. Examples of making planning a part of the board’s regular work:

- One nonprofit identified annual “big rocks” – as in the rocks you put in the bucket first, before adding pebbles and sand. In one given year, the priorities included a new brand identity, an acquisition and new earned revenue streams. All priorities were accomplished, when they might otherwise have gotten lost in the shuffle.
- In its first meeting of the New Year, one board does a real-time postmortem of the prior year [rather than a staff report] and confirms the 3-5 top priorities for the coming year. It caps off that meeting with “New Year’s Resolutions,” in which each board member makes commitments publicly and in writing.
- A third board blew up its committee structure to align its work with the strategic plan. That board now operates with a handful of standing committees, channeling the bulk of its work into task forces that have specific mandates and timeframes.

Most funders require a multi-year plan, not to torture the nonprofit but because it is such a potent driver and predictor of results. The best strategic plans can be summarized and visualized on a single sheet of paper.

A third way boards help create impact is by:

3. Supporting a positive working environment for staff

Nonprofit leaders deal with a staggering number of stakeholders. They have to manage via influence and inspiration rather than position. And they have to make amazing things happen with limited resources. This can lead to burnout, and to the urgent squeezing out of the important.

Exceptional boards strive to protect staff from unnecessary requests and fire drills. At minimum, board members need to keep their eyes on the “big rocks” and avoid non-essential or time-constrained requests that divert energy.

Here are 3 examples of boards taking good care of staff:

- One board mapped out clear, discrete roles for staff and board. When a new board member began interrogating a staff member on minor details, a veteran stepped up to challenge that behavior.
- Another board narrowed the experience gap between board, staff and program beneficiaries by adding a former program participant, now a corporate manager, to its ranks.
- A board chair helped the CEO increase his effectiveness through a combination of empowering, generous public support and direct, proactive feedback delivered in private and coupled with access to opportunities for professional growth.

A fourth way boards positively influence mission outcomes is through:

4. Open, generative discussion and debate

Have you sat through a board meeting filled with reports about things that have already happened? Many nonprofit boards spend the bulk of their time reporting on the past and discussing current opportunities -- resulting in a board that is bored, mired or missing.

- When one board discovered it was spending 80% of its time in the past and present, the incoming chair moved to a "consent agenda." Written reports were shared in advance and only discussed if there were questions. The chair refocused meetings on issues, ideas and the future. Each meeting had a focus topic, which provoked lively engagement and generated strategic new thinking.
- Another board decided to conclude every meeting with an executive session that began with a gut check: What's on your mind? The first session revealed universal angst over a budget deficit, as well as unexpected consensus on a turning-point issue that could have been divisive. These issues hardly came up during the official board meeting! The chair was able to productively advance the conversation and work the issues collaboratively with the CEO.
- Another board does an informal self-evaluation after each meeting: Did we spend time on the right things today? What emerging issues should we be discussing?

Board members generative discussion by asking questions, listening generously and debating pros and cons respectfully. Insist that your board allot at least some

time for open, generative, unbounded discussion. The results really matter on the mission front.

And finally, exceptional boards are good at:

5. Peer-to-peer accountability

A board with strong peer-to-peer relationships, passion for the mission and accountability can do extraordinary things. Building trust takes time and effort--relationships need to be cultivated and built.

Here are 3 examples of boards doing extraordinary work, inspired by trusting peer-to-peer relationships and accountability:

- One board created a “kitchen cabinet” to work with the CEO. It was an expanded version of the executive committee. At cabinet meetings, everyone let their hair down, brainstormed issues and came up with ideas to address everything from nagging challenges to strategies for courting dream board members and acquisition prospects.
- Another board created an annual yearend tradition in which the chair hosts informal small-group luncheons. In a similar vein, another holds an annual retreat at a board member's mountain home. People look forward to these more intimate experiences—and over the years traditions and stories enrich the collective trust.
- Realizing the power of celebrating both team and individual successes, one board addressed both dimensions:
 - The board chair created an award for each board member, presented at a ceremony celebrating each of their roles in a successful capital campaign.
 - The chair starts each meeting with “shout outs,” thanking individuals for their specific contributions in the past few weeks.

Board team building builds health and respect—which transfers to the CEO and the staff and has a salutary effect on the mission front.

Does your board contribute to success on the mission front through all or most of the approaches outlined in this article?

What have your experiences been? Please share them, and we will include them in a future article.

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