

Nonprofit Strategies



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Drawing lines between board, staff duties

One of the most difficult aspects of governing a nonprofit organization is balancing the respective roles of the board and the staff.

Having both a strong board and a strong staff are essential for success, but making sure each does what they are suppose to do is the challenge. When the lines are blurred, dysfunction can ensue.

The board needs to stay focused on the mission, policies and overall direction of the organization and that is primarily done at board meetings. However, this is difficult to do when board members are absent, when materials are being distributed at the meeting (so no one has a chance to read them in advance), or when the agenda is not being followed. It's the board chair's responsibility to see that no one's time is being wasted and that the board is focused the important issues – and not on what color the napkins should be at the next fund raiser. It is often easier to deal with the small stuff, but board's need to keep looking at the big picture and

exercising their role as a governing body, and not take on the work of the staff.

Board's also need to remember that they have only one, and only one, employee: the CEO. All other staff report to the CEO, not the board. If there are performance issues with the staff, the CEO should be handle them. Board should provide feedback to the CEO as necessary, but never meddle into management and personnel issues.

Staff members can overstep their bounds as well. It is not easy running a nonprofit corporation. The hours are long, the stress is high and the pay is low.

However, it's the CEO's responsibility to implement the policies and mission *as established by the board*. The reality is that the CEO serves at the pleasure of the board, but some seem to forget that fact. They act like it's "their" organization, since they put all of their energy and passion into it, and attempt to exercise

a much larger role in the governance of the organization. In reality, the community, as represented by the board, owns the organization, and that's who should govern it.

It is important to periodically discuss the respective roles of the board and the staff. Boards should set policy and direction: "their noses are in, but their fingers are out" of the day-to-day management of the organization. They know, by having the CEO tell them, what's going on at the agency, but they don't touch anything. Conversely, it's the CEO's responsibility to see that the board chair can run an effective board meeting. That's done by having the agenda and materials are sent out in advance, providing all of the key data the board needs for decision making, and insuring that any staff that may be at the meeting, are there to report and answer questions, and not participate in the meeting like they are quasi-board members.

Nonprofit are effective when the board and staff act in partnership, with each knowing their respective roles.

Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other Tuesday in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit organizations. Dave Edwards, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations.

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