

## Positioning Your Board for Successful Engagement

*Teri Bordenave, The Thalia Group*

For a few months this fall, I participated in an online conversation about the need to keep Board members engaged in their role, and an exploration about some of the methods used to do this. This exchange started with the post; *“Does anyone have an example of a board agenda that helps steer the conversation towards strategy and away from operations?”*

Contributors to this dialog were particularly interested in a Board meeting agenda format that would successfully round everyone up and move them on or back to their particular place at the table. Oh, were it only as simple as that...

Sure, there are ways we can structure our Board meetings to keep the focus on the 30,000 foot view; setting the vision and governing. Several well-intentioned folks - myself included - offered up their models (see box for a suggested format). An agenda that truly focuses on the strategic plan is one approach I have found successful, both as a nonprofit CEO and as a consultant working with other nonprofits and their Boards.

However, a well-designed agenda alone will not accomplish this goal. One of my favorite quotes - this one by Cyril Houle - sums it up quite succinctly, *“A good Board is a victory, not a gift.”* My short list for the keys to a good Board begins with a way to *position* your Board for effective engagement; a strategic, targeted and comprehensive Board recruitment process, or as Jim Collins puts it, getting the right people on your bus! Bringing the best possible group of individuals onto your Board is the **most** critical step you can take. Investing the effort to select those people who are passionate about your mission, fill a void in your current Board composition, and who are a good fit with your organizational culture, will have long term benefits. Making the right choices at this point will save you much frustration and time down the road.

The other keys on my short list include:

- Timely orientation and “on-boarding” process for new Trustees
- Well articulated expectations from the outset
- Detailed “Letter of Commitment” or Contract with each Trustee
- Ongoing Board education
- Periodic Board Self-Assessment
- Comprehensive Board Manual
- A strategic plan that clearly defines the organization’s strategic goals, timeline, responsible party/ies and metrics
- Consistent reporting from CEO on progress against strategic plan goals
- Effective Board leadership; i.e., an experienced Board Chair
- A governance structure that supports successful strategic plan implementation
- Trusting, respectful relationship between the Board and the CEO.

If all or even a good number of these approaches are in place, in addition to knowing what their role is and being engaged in it, your Board is likely to also feel well supported in their critical governance position and much less likely to venture out of it and into operations.

*Teri Bordenave, MHSA has worked in the nonprofit sector since 1979 in a variety of senior leadership roles, including 20 years as President/CEO, and as a consultant. Her expertise includes strategic planning, leadership development, strategic restructuring, team building, organizational development, governance, change management and relationship building. Teri brings her background as a poet and artist to her consulting efforts, approaching each endeavor as a unique work of art.*

## Sample Board Meeting Agenda

### BOARD OF TRUSTEES' MEETING

Date

8:30-10:00 am

Our Vision:

Our Mission:

#### AGENDA

8:30 Call to Order **Board Chair**  
Consent Agenda  
October 2011 Meeting Minutes

8:35 Fiscal Oversight Committee **Treasurer**  
Fourth Quarter 2011 Report

8:50 Chair's Report **Board Chair**

9:00 Strategic Plan Implementation

**Goal I:** To find and develop a diverse group of effective Trustees who will commit to moving this Strategic Plan forward and who fit the profile, as per the Governance Committee matrix.

*Proposed Slate of Officers and Trustees* **Governance Committee Chair**

**\*\*\*Action Item-Please review the enclosed slate and be prepared to vote on it**

**Goal II:** Using FY 2010 as a baseline, increase total amount raised by 8%/year thereafter.

*Planned Giving Program* **Development Committee Chair/  
Development Dept. Head**

**\*\*\*Action Item - Proposal to create XXX Legacy Society for Planned Gifts included in the Chair's Report**

*2011 Fundraising Status Report &  
Review of Trustee Pledge System* **Development Dept. Head**

*Proposed merging of the Major Gifts  
and Fund Development Committees*

**\*\*\*Action Item - Please review the rationale included in the Chair's Report**

9:45 CEO Report Chief Executive Officer

9:55 Other Business

10:00 Adjournment