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Snippet #169 Staff/Board Relationships

The currency of the nonprofit is passion – both a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing that nothing matches the dedication and commitment of those who band together to work for a cause they believe in. The curse is that because this *is* so personal, the ability to think logically, objectively, and strategically is often severely hampered. The board/staff relationship is key to a nonprofit's success.

The nonprofit faces unique challenges to creating and maintaining a healthy board/staff relationship. In a for-profit corporate environment, no one rises through the ranks planning to take the helm for a year or two, during which time the staff continues in their roles. In a nonprofit, the executive director and staff have to build a new relationship every election cycle. A president who comes into the office planning on “their year, their legacy, their way” causes the association to step back or start over with every new president. Instead of carrying out a long term strategy. New logos, themes, and tchotchkes are developed and the “new era” (at least for a year or two) begins. This type of activity is so obviously disruptive and contrary to good governance that the board may lose integrity with the staff, who have a longer view in mind. New boards (and especially new presidents) must come into their offices with a sense of history and the strategic plan, looking to fulfill collective goals and not on their own special legacy and a pile of souvenirs from their terms of office.

This is not to say staffs don't also bear some responsibility in creating this atmosphere. A hallmark of nonprofit staff is their dedication and desire to make things easier for the leadership. It can even go to extremes. Many years ago, after a new association officer left the staff room, I heard a staff member tell a new employee: “Do you know who that was? That was (insert name), the new (insert office). If he asks for your first born, you give it to him.” A healthy board/staff relationship requires both parties to recognize that the staff has the day-to-day expertise in managing the association and fulfilling the mission, while the officers and directors have the responsibility to make decisions and govern the association. Staff who get involved in political disagreements (or worse, take sides), become confidants with members, or become vested in their own opinions about issues, create mistrust and tension.

The trust and tension issues can surface in the board room. There are many executive directors who believe they should be full members of the board. But this dramatically changes the dynamic – how can an employee be a full participant as an owner? And what if, on another issue, the executive director deliberates and votes, ends up as opposition in the minority and then must be trusted to implement that decision? Deliberation and counsel are two different things; the executive director should respect the board's right to govern and recognize this is the board's turf. During board meetings, the executive director and designated staff should be consulted for their expertise. The executive director should be a guiding hand, ensuring that the board has all of the information at their disposal in advance to ensure sound decision-making, but not advocating or lobbying for any one choice.

By the same token, the office is the executive director's workspace; board members must keep in mind that the executive director was hired to run the operations. Getting involved in personnel matters or giving directives to staff without the knowledge and consent of the executive director is encroaching. Having respect for each other's “space” will form a solid foundation on which to build a working relationship. Except with respect to the executive directors, hiring and firing decisions are not made by the board. Even if someone seems to be a valuable and longtime employee, it's not up to the board members to get involved in a termination. Board members must remember that the executive director works at the direction of board as a whole, not for any one individual, and the staff works at the direction of the executive director.

Respect and trust are earned and boards and staff must work to earn – and keep – them.