



BOARD WORKS

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◆ BOARD WORK IS GROUP WORK

By: Rick Stiffney

We all know that teamwork is important. Dean Smith, the highly successful basketball coach at the University of North Carolina, reportedly told a young Michael Jordan, “Michael, if you can’t pass, you can’t play!” Just like any great sports team, orchestra, or theatre troupe, a great board engages in good group work.

The board’s group work is far more challenging and complex than most of us recognize. I interact with a lot of boards that find themselves in challenging circumstances because they did not give adequate attention to group work.

In this article, I would like to discuss four aspects of good group work.

First, an effective group has to have a relatively high sense of *social glue*. Surveys with governing boards, like those we relate to, indicate that most board members place high priority on being part of a group to which they feel they belong and can make a personal contribution. Sure, the mission needs to be meaningful and the agenda engaging. But even if those elements are in place, the group needs to have good chemistry in order to jell.

There are lots of ways to build cohesion. For starters, a well-designed [new member orientation](#) is helpful. Some boards use retreats that involve board members, spouses and senior leaders as a way of building social capital in the board room. Still other boards gather for light refreshments and fellowship before each meeting. Socializing becomes a part of the board’s rhythm or ritual, not a hoped-for by-product.

Second, group work requires *purposefulness*. It’s been said that board members will always be doing both rowing and steering. If they are rowing, they are working hard to ensure that the organization has enough resources to support its endeavors. If board members are steering, they are helping to keep the mission clear and to set long-range direction. Some not-for-profit organizations are so well endowed that the board needs to do little rowing. However, if the organization is to have legitimacy and not simply be driven by a CEO or be reacting to a few stakeholders, the board needs to engage in some steering, that is, setting long-range direction. Steering becomes a central focus for group work.

Third, group work requires *well reasoned decision-making*. Decision-making styles vary. An author I read recently observed that there are at least seven different ways groups make decisions: the “car pool” (consensus), “buy-in” (all have a chance to weigh in but someone decides), “top-down” (doesn’t need much explanation), “vote-up” (classically a democratic or majority-rules approach), “in-group” (the real movers in the group get it done their way), “center-strip” (the poll watchers or external stakeholders decide), and “outside-rule” (the consultants decide). We have all seen illustrations of these types of decision-making processes, admittedly graphically overstated, in the board room.



Developing Social Cohesion with Board Members

Developing strong social cohesion among board members begins with new member orientation.

New board member orientation ought to be primarily board-driven. That is, board members (most likely, the chair of the board or chair of governance) should own the process of orientation and play a significant role in it.

Implementing board-driven orientation is more difficult for large regional or national boards. However, the principle still applies. For example, the MHS Alliance national board is far-flung with a board chair that lives on both coasts, but we still pay attention to orientation. Our chair does personalized phone calls and goes over major board trends and expectations with each new board member. When boards own the orientation, they communicate loudly and clearly that they are inviting the new member to join their work.

Assigning a mentor to each new board member also builds a sense of belonging. Giving new board members a meaningful way to contribute their experience early-on affirms that they are a welcome part of the group. In addition, crafting the board agenda to allow time for board members to build real social relationships adds social texture.

For further information or to suggest topics for future issues of Board Works, please contact MHS Alliance at Emily@mhsonline.org.

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(continued)

Most not-for-profit boards would probably say that they rely primarily on the “car pool” and “buy in” approaches and use “vote-up” only when necessary. However, most boards I observe take little time to engage matters critically. In point of fact, in the face of perceived time constraints, the vote-up or majority rules guided by Roberts Rules of Order frequently trumps aspiration.

The Quakers use well-designed and disciplined processes for consensus-building. Among the critical features in the process are these: adequate time to process, engagement for all stakeholders affected by a decision, and expectant listening. Most organizations can learn from this approach. Far too often, boards give too little thought to the stakeholders who will be affected and seldom engage them in the decision-making process. We think we already know what they think. Further, we seldom take time to listen in silence or listen for the real message or meaning that might emerge between the spoken and written word.

Finally, going beyond group work to build a *group culture* takes time. Good habits and bad habits can be passed forward through succeeding generations of board members. CEOs can make a huge difference in group culture. A CEO who communicates in clear-headed and non-defensive ways will contribute significantly to building trust and high social capital.

Ultimately, good board work depends upon good group work.

◆ FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does our board spend more time rowing or steering?
2. How does our board build social glue?
3. What is our dominant decision-making style?

Visit Rick's Blog at <http://mhsalliance.wordpress.com/>.

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MHS Alliance strengthens and extends Anabaptist health and human service ministries in faithfully and effectively fulfilling their missions.



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