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Is Your Boardroom a Safe Space?

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Nonprofit governance in the 21st century is a challenge. The markets are turbulent. Demographics are shifting. Stakeholder expectations are increasing. The roles of government, private enterprise and the voluntary social sector are changing and the distinctions blurring. Nonprofit boards are forced to make high-stakes decisions under increasing pressure.

Amidst such a tumultuous time, is your boardroom a *safe space*?

It's not about whether the ceiling is about to fall in or if the floor might give way. A *safe space* in this context is a place where all are able to feel valued--a place where everyone can contribute freely without fear of being marginalized or dismissed.

There are many ways to create and facilitate this special type of safe space. First, though, consider why it's important.

To make wise decisions in a timely way, boards need to both anticipate and be prepared to adapt. Board and senior leadership must share a deep commitment to core mission, values and faith orientation. There needs to be attention to process to successfully create a culture of inquiry, robust dialogue and thoughtful discernment. Importantly, there must be a rich diversity of talent, worldview, constituent perspective, learning style and personality.

To accomplish any of this, a positive environment that encourages creativity and free-thinking is critical. This will enable the board to deepen and expand their quality of discernment.

5 steps to develop a safe space

1. **Begin with a belief or conviction that diversity is an asset.**

It's not about being politically correct and having the most diverse and eclectic group of individuals on the board. The true goal is wisdom in discernment and decision making. In an increasingly diverse society, multiple perspectives, and professional opinions can deepen the quality of decision making. This is assuming that the diversity present is aligned on shared mission, core values and desired results.

2. **Develop a thoughtful and welcoming orientation for new board members.**

Orientation is about two things: informing the incoming board member about the organization and informing the organization about the new board member.

The first can be accomplished by assigning a mentor to welcome and encourage the new board member as he/she acclimates. This mentor can act as a sounding board, deepening the sense that this is a real and trustworthy group of people.

The latter allows the organization to smartly engage the gifts, perspectives and style that this newest member brings.

Is Your Boardroom a Safe Space? (cont'd)

3. Be thoughtful about designing processes for discernment and decision making.

Not all board members learn, process information, contribute or decide matters in the same way. There are significant differences between ethnic groups, religious traditions and cultures. The board chair and CEO need to develop meeting management and decision-making processes that invite all to participate. Our commitment to the Anabaptist faith should urge a particular attentiveness to this practice.

Invite board members to write down a few words or questions that they have in relationship to a critical agenda item. Next, move around the table, inviting board members to contribute. Most agenda items have both possibilities and risks. The chair can focus the board first on possibilities, then turn to risk. This method invites all to contribute in assessment without pigeon-holing anyone as just the nay-sayer or the cheerleader.

4. Experiment with new ways of using time.

Not everyone will verbally engage as quickly as others. Some board members are quick to come to conclusions; others less so. Neither quick nor slow necessarily results in wisdom. Boards that are creating safe space ensure that an adequate amount of time is given to matters where there are far-ranging perspectives, as those differences can enrich the outcome of the decision.

5. Practice being more comfortable with tension and conflict.

Sometimes our Anabaptist commitment to community leads us to “keep the peace,” when in fact, a little feisty interaction or conflict might be healthy. Board members must be willing to share their perspective or opinion, then release it, so that others can engage with it. As we develop capacity to engage differences and embrace tension, we find common ground and move forward together. This is board work at its best.

Note that there are times when the board and CEO need to address issues that need utmost candor and confidentiality. Personnel matters, high-level strategic decisions, legal issues, or matters related to the executive’s work or performance need a safe space all their own.

For Discussion

Ready to start developing—or redeveloping—your organization’s safe space? Use these three questions to spark conversation with your board:

1. Do you believe you have adequate diversity of perspective in your boardroom to guide the organization in its mission, core values and strategic direction?
2. What are you doing to orient new board members?
3. How do you manage both agenda and process to ensure maximum group participation?



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