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Board Orientation - What Should Really Take Place

In a recent column I addressed the topic of not-for-profits going beyond volunteer leadership orientation and into the delivery of volunteer leadership training. I was pleased to learn at CSAE's national conference that several executives plan to increase training activity in their organizations and that the column was a reminder to get started. On the other hand, my discovery that some of our colleagues are not even at the board orientation stage had me quite disappointed.

If not-for-profits are to serve as public benefit organizations and accomplish what they envision for their world, they must focus more on the 20 percent of members that generate 80 percent of the results. The required knowledge and skills must be made more accessible to the critical 20 percent. A key first step is to provide leaders with a board orientation.

Why Board Orientation?

Orientation is required so that directors can find answers to these critical questions:

- What skills and knowledge do each of us bring to the table?
- What do we need to know and learn?
- How will we function as a Board?
- Within what principles will we operate?
- What resources are available?
- How often should we meet?
- Where will we meet?
- How will we run our meetings? With whom must we communicate?
- How will we communicate?
- What administrative systems will we require?
- Will we require outside advice on legal, planning and financial matters?
- What are our legal responsibilities?
- What decision-making and problem-solving techniques will we use?

Some factors to consider when designing a program of board orientation include:
budgets; technology; types of members; size and locations; director selection; real development and directional needs; and association, board and other key issues.

Having a Director's Guide, online and as a hardcopy format, will support orientation activities. A guide should include these key sections:

A. About the Guide
B. Who are we?
C. Where are we going?
D. What policies, standards, rules or guidelines do we apply?
E. How are we doing?
F. What do I need to know to fulfill my responsibilities? (Toolkit)

What contents should be in a guide?

Based on a review of Association Management Education Program student responses to an assignment dealing with board orientation, I found that contents for guides are initially basic but become more involved as experience with orientation occurs. Some contents for basic and beyond basic guides are:

Director's Guide Contents (Covering the Basics)

- Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws
- Statement of Director Roles and Responsibilities
- Product, Program and Services Information Summary
- Last Annual Report
- Last Budget
- Current Financial Reports
- Last Year's Board Minutes
- Strategic Plan
- Policies
- Organizational Standards and Guidelines
- Organizational Charts
- Chief Staff Officers Role and Responsibilities
- Director List and Contact Information
- Expense Reimbursement Forms
- Schedule of Board Meeting Dates

Director's Guide (Beyond Basics)

- Association History
- Director Bios
- Prior Year Reports from the Chief Staff Officer
- Committee and Task Force Activity or Work Plans
- Marketing and Communications Plan and Materials
- Advocacy Plan
- Member Recruitment Plan/Manual

- Conference Manual
- Volunteer Management Handbook
- Fundraising Plan
- Details on Products, Programs and Services
- Staff Policy and Procedures
- Chief staff officer and other senior staff bios
- Trends and Issues for Associations
- Related reading, tools and other resources (e.g. CSAE's monographs for Directors of Non-Profit corporations)
- Self evaluation form
- Board evaluation form
- Problem solving tools

Orientation sessions can be delivered either as pre-board two-hour, half-day, or full day sessions. The full day session often goes beyond the basics of orientation and gets into training and future focus strategic thinking. When planning this type of session, it is important to consider who, what, when and how. To encourage involvement there could be pre-session reading requirements or other activities such as asking directors to come prepared to discuss what they hope to achieve during their term. Directors could also be asked to identify special training needs that would help them or their Board carry out duties efficiently and effectively. If resources and time do not permit an in-person session, it is possible to develop interactive sessions in an E-learning format.

Individual sessions may be required. These sessions could include the Chair, Chief Staff Officer and "new" director. Individual sessions are more private, and discussions about intended goals and desired outcomes become clearer, as do the director's learning needs.

In order to address critical questions during sessions with a limited amount of time, it is important to have an agenda which could include:

- Welcome
- Introductions and individual desired achievements
- Introduction to the Board Guide and resources
- Overview of the organization
- Review of roles, responsibilities and structure
- Review of strategic plan and overview of activities
- Board administrative functioning (motions, etc.)
- Final questions and answers
- Session evaluation

A longer agenda may also include participatory training involving role plays and real issues for one or more of the following:

- Developing/updating the external environmental analysis

- Developing consensus and teamwork
- Problem solving and developing policy
- Understanding the governance model and successful meetings management
- Understanding results of the member survey and managing issues

Where is the washroom?

This heading may have attracted attention, but some basic needs must be met if individuals are to fulfill their leadership obligations.

Topics to cover, as a minimum, include:

- Purpose of orientation and rules
- Strategic statements
- Tools of governance
- Board responsibilities
- Board and staff relationship
- How to be a good director
- Officers and committees
- Meetings, planning and measuring results
- Insurance, legal and administrative aspects

There is value in introducing the Board to the Canadian Society of Association Executives. Understanding the purpose of and value of this organization could result in ongoing professional development support for staff, as well as the Board or individual Board members.

Participant interaction in orientation sessions helps the learning process. To increase interaction, have participants find answers to questions in the guide such as:

- What is our process for developing a position statement?
- What is the Board's role and responsibility with staff?
- How do we measure outcomes?

A task list is a tool to review during the orientation session. The task list is a chart that lists all key organizational tasks under key headings. i.e. membership, advocacy, etc. Opposite the task column is a listing of who does what, i.e. Chief Staff Officer, Chief Elected Officer, Full Board, Staff and Board, Committees, Staff Specialist, etc. This tool helps clear up uncertainty as to who does what.

Public ceremonies bring out the best in people. Have new directors sign their agreement to serve and comply with standards of conduct for directors in public at an annual general meeting or at the orientation. This will instill a commitment beyond the orientation.

How do you make orientation happen on a regular basis?

Establish a policy and ensure it is part of your orientation. Set completion of the orientation as a measurable outcome for the chief elected official and the chief staff officer.

The objective of an orientation policy is to ensure all members of the Board receive information and training, as required, to fulfill their governance roles and responsibilities and comply with the organization's principles of effective governance. Policy statements could propose that members of the Board shall receive a Directors Guide prior to their first meeting and within 60 days of taking office they will participate in a group or individual orientation session. It is important to support policy with application information such as the specifics of who, what, when, etc.

As we begin to understand the role of knowledge management in associations, perhaps there will be a greater appreciation for improving volunteer leadership capacity through improved orientation activities. Basic and advanced information, including actual agendas and content, is available on the Internet.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.