

How Healthy is Accountability in Your Association?

When people think about accountability, they rarely think in terms of a broad framework. Rather, they think of bits and pieces such as audited financial statements, annual general meetings, reports and staff performance evaluations. Yet practices go well beyond these core requirements and it is possible to have an integrated framework.

An accountability framework consists of three elements: transparency; disclosure; and redress. Accountability program components include planning and performance reporting, policies and procedures, and roles and responsibilities. These elements and components are linked to relationships between:

Board and individual directors, members, committees, staff and others
Staff and board, committees, members, staff and others.

A discussion activity in CSAE's Association Management Education (AME) Program examines accountability practices, and asks association managers what more would they do and why. Based on a review of responses, core practices used have been identified, along with other, not so common practices that some use and others would like to put in place.

The following list of accountability practices was identified:

Board to Members and Third Parties

CORE

- Prepare an Annual Report, include audited financial statements and provide to all members
- Hold an Annual General Meeting
- Set out financial and other key accountabilities in bylaws
- Have a signing authority policy
- Have a purchasing and commitment policy
- Provide an orientation and outline roles and responsibilities
- Approve an annual budget

Not So Common

- Develop and approve a strategic plan with desired outcomes
- Approve a business plan to support the strategic plan

- Receive and monitor regular staff reports with variances on progress to plans
- Conduct a performance evaluation of the Chief Staff Officer
- Conduct mini member satisfaction surveys annually and comprehensive surveys every four years
- Have an ethical and conflict of interest policy for board and staff
- Have the Vice President approve board and committee members' expense claims
- Provide members with quarterly reports on progress to desired outcomes
- Ask members to provide input on major positions or directional decisions
- Use formal evaluation and reporting tools during in-camera Board sessions
- Receive and monitor reports on compliance with third party requirements (government, funders)
- Engage in board self-assessment relative to responsibilities and outcomes
- Conduct a formal annual evaluation of results against desired outcomes
- Have a member complaints policy and review process
- Have all committees and groups provide reports at each board meeting and annually, indicating achievements, variances and future plans
- Have committee chairs report at general meetings and quarterly on the Web site

Staff to Board, Members, Staff and Third Parties

CORE

- Provide a business plan, including budget to achieve strategic plan outcomes
- Provide reports at each meeting on activities, issues and progress achieved to date
- Provide staff job descriptions indicating clear responsibilities and assigned outcomes
- Conduct staff performance evaluations
- Have the Chief Staff Officer provide a report at the AGM and in the Annual Report.
- Have policy and process to ensure internal control and financial reporting
- Have policies for external compliance reports

NOT SO COMMON

- Conduct staff satisfaction surveys
- Identify and report on staff competency development required to support plans
- Use a strategic management model to integrate activities
- Have an independent evaluation of operations to standards/practices every three years
- Have staff members use an activity plan to report on targets and progress
- Provide the board with a report on member complaints

Most association managers who responded to the discussion believe their associations do a good job of meeting core practices. Improvements planned for accountability are in the areas of board, committee and staff evaluations, and frequent and timely communications. Technology is increasing accountability options as more information can be shared and discussed, hence decisions can be made on timely basis. An example is putting minutes or a draft policy statement on the Web site or e-mailing these to members.

Relationships in an association need to be nurtured on a regular basis. Using good accountability practices will remove uncertainty, reduce risk, provide clarity and strengthen links. If you have some practices that are not listed here, pass them on so we can share them with the association community. Accountability in associations can be impacted by government policy.

To find out how, read the Panel on Accountability and Governance in the Voluntary Sector Final Report and responses to it at <http://www.vsr-trsb.net/main-e.html>.

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.