

A Board Member's Handbook

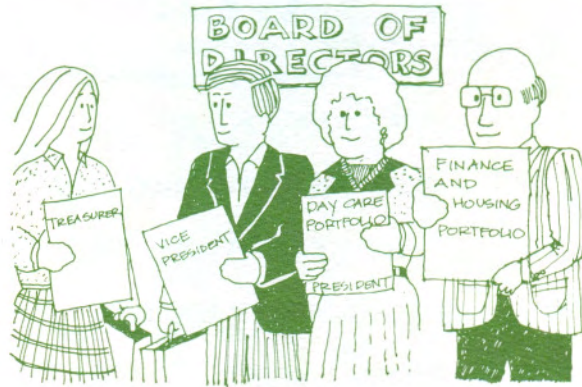


Northern Alberta Development Council

TO THE READER

This handbook has been produced for northerners who are directors on boards, or who are considering volunteering to sit on a board. It will help board members who belong to such services as:

Family and Community Support Services
Economic Development Councils
Health Units
Libraries
Chambers of Commerce
Native Friendship Centres
Community Associations
Senior Citizen Centres
Tourism Associations
Mental Health Associations
Detoxification Centres
Day Care Centres
Youth Groups
Other permanent or temporary boards that service northern communities



Participating on a community board can be challenging and is sometimes difficult. Many times, boards work well but sometimes they do not. Nevertheless, citizen participation on service boards is a vital part of community life because boards have an overall responsibility to maintain efficiency and this is in the community's best interests. Boards achieve both efficiency and a quality service by working through an agency's staff. In this regard, they must understand management.

The basic role of the board of directors is to guide services so that policies and decisions best reflect local circumstances. Boards are often able to identify important community issues, to determine what is required and to develop suitable services or mechanisms to resolve community problems.

No single handbook can hope to address all the issues or problems that a board is likely to face. Our purpose is, rather, to provide a problem-solving handbook that is more general than it is specialized. The boards we have in mind are usually not set up by special legislation, are not profit-making, are composed of volunteers, and probably deliver a service as a private agency whether government funded or not. These services may be small with meager budgets and few staff even though they may serve a large number of people.

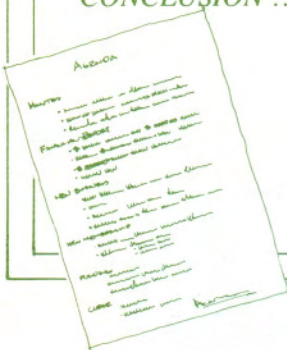
The handbook is based on the following beliefs:

- Effective community service requires citizen participation.
- You don't have to be an expert to participate.
- Many community people have the skills to be members.
- People may ask to become involved as well as be invited.
- Membership on a board can be a learning experience.
- Better informed boards make better decisions.
- Opinion, attitudes and everyday experience are important elements of the decision-making process.



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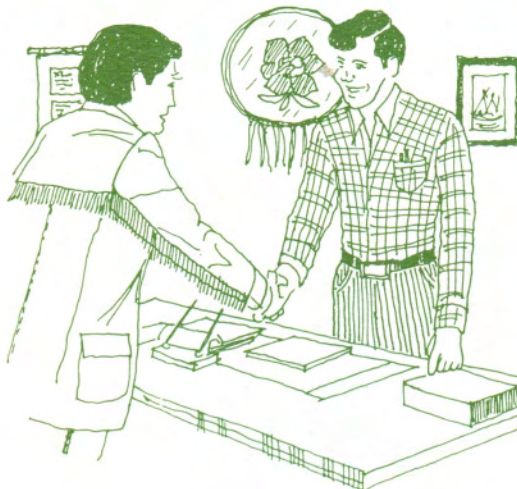


WHY DOES ANYONE JOIN A BOARD?

This is a tough question because it asks each board member to do a self-evaluation and sets the stage for the member's role on the board as well as his or her relationship to other board members. Such a self-evaluation will influence the way time spent on the board is assessed.

Board members indicate that they join boards for a variety of reasons:

1. To meet new people
2. To broaden their experience
3. To make a change in an agency or to influence its priorities
4. To fill a void in their lives and to deal with boredom
5. To feel they are doing something worthwhile
6. To provide a platform for promoting strongly-held beliefs (to 'grind an ax')
7. To gain personal status or prestige in a community
8. To gain such fringe benefits as 'perks' or honoraria
9. Because they were asked to join and didn't know how to say no
10. For altruistic or idealistic reasons - because they strongly believe in the service
11. Because they went to a meeting, 'spoke up', and got elected
12. Because they or someone close to them is a client of the service



HOW DO YOU JOIN A BOARD OF DIRECTORS?

A. Necessary Self-Analysis

First of all, if you want to be an effective board member, you must know why you want to join a board. Some people sit on boards because it is a prestigious thing to do, or they believe it will help them in business. These are valid reasons and you should be honest with yourself if these are the motives behind your desire to serve as a board member.

Many people wish to be of service either to the community or to a specific group. If you feel this way, look around your community and seek out organizations that interest you and which are working to provide a service that you feel is of real value.

Your time and energy are important considerations. Before you accept a board position, realistically assess how much you are willing to offer and how much you may be asked to offer. This is helpful both to yourself and to the prospective board. Many people try to 'do it all' and lose sight of the need to balance community concern against what is best for themselves. Such people become frustrated and burned out. They do not help either themselves or the board. It is also important to remember that you can be a member of too many boards, and will probably not serve effectively on any of them.

Boards are often looking for people willing to participate, so if you find an organization that excites your interest, and where you would like to serve, call the chairman or the agency director for information and do not hesitate to offer your assistance.



B. Tips and Suggestions

Joining a board is an important decision and should not be made lightly. You should try to find out something about the agency the board will represent before you volunteer to serve. Here are some tips and suggestions to think about if you are considering sitting on a board:

1. Keep your ear to the ground; talk to people.
2. Talk to those who work in that service area: government and non-government people.
3. Talk to both sitting and past board members.
4. Talk to the director and staff of the agency.
5. Talk to the agency's clients if appropriate and approved.
6. Read the minutes and other available literature of the agency.
7. Go to the annual meeting.
8. Make your decision about joining only after careful reflection.
9. Tell the agency director or the board chairman that you are available.



HOW CAN THE AGENCY HELP YOU DECIDE?

Any agency which desires intelligent, committed, active board members must take the time to talk to interested people. It should also provide literature that clearly shows what the agency's objectives are, how it goes about achieving those objectives, who its sponsors are (if any), how it is funded, and so on.

The agency should provide prospective board members with the names of staff, other board members, community members and (depending upon the nature of the agency's work) its clients.

The agency should outline the specific nature of the board members' duties and indicate something of the time commitment required.

If there is an honorarium, travel expense account, paid membership to other organizations, or other financial benefit, the agency should tell you about this. If, on the other hand, expenses are your obligation, you should be told this as well.

An honest discussion about difficult issues that the agency faces should be raised for you to think about.



HOW CAN THE AGENCY HELP YOU IN YOUR NEW ROLE?

The agency can help you to adjust to your new role as board member. Most such groups run an orientation program for new members. As well, they can and will look after the paperwork involved in board meetings.

New Member Orientation Checklist

- Updated policy manual
- Bylaws
- Organizational chart
- Job descriptions of agency staff
- Resource material about the agency/service
- Minutes of recent board meetings
- Most recent budget with explanations
- Introductions to staff
- Introductions to other board members

Operations Checklist for Boards

- Prepare agenda
- Send out meeting material in advance
- Establish meeting dates/locations
- Present regular progress reports
- Provide educational/informational/learning opportunities
- Set up 'working' committees

WHAT IS THE BOARD'S ROLE?

Determining and understanding the role of the board is important for all concerned. The board will be ineffective if its members do not know what they are supposed to do. Weak boards have, in the past, become the puppets of a director or a staff person with strong ambitions.

A. The Board Carries a Legal Authority

The board is, in almost all cases, the legal authority for the agency. In effect, all services are rendered in the board's name even though the actual provision of those services rests with the agency director (or manager) and the staff who are usually employees of the board. This is the case whether the board is weak and inactive or strong and active. In practice, community services board authority is generally not exercised in a heavy-handed or formal manner. Considerable authority is often delegated to the agency director and staff. Although this is appropriate, it should be remembered that the source of that authority is the board.

B. Management of Funds

Board responsibility is clearly shown when contracts or funds for service are negotiated and authorized by the board and the agency's various funders. The board has the major responsibility for financial management. Often, board members are involved in raising money as well. The funders and the community expect a board member to be aware of all funding arrangements, financial policies and expenditure patterns. You, as a board member, have an obligation to know these things and to understand them.

Part of managing funds includes developing the operating budget and monitoring expenditures. Usually, previous budgets serve as a guide and the draft budget is prepared by the agency director and presented to the board for approval. It is therefore important for board members to understand the budget and the reasons dollars are distributed in the way they are. The board must also make sure that the budget does not stray from the agency's stated goals and priorities.

C. Hiring of Support Staff

Another important board responsibility is the hiring of the managing director of the agency and sometimes of the staff. Typically, the board hires the director and the director hires the support staff. We suggest that input from existing staff and perhaps suggestions from knowledgeable community members can help the board to hire the right person. In the case of support staff, the board reviews the managing director's decisions and authorizes any job offer made. Similarly, in the case of terminations, the board acts directly with respect to the manager and as a review body for his or her recommendations regarding staff and volunteers. The entire board must be involved in these crucial decisions.

D. Policy Setting/Selecting Goals

Every agency operates under a mandate describing what it is supposed to do. This is usually in general terms and can be met in a variety of ways. It is the duty of the board to set out both the specific goals of the agency and the way those goals will be met. The managing director seeks to carry out activities in a proper manner to meet those objectives while the board of directors monitors activities

to see that the agency remains on course.

The board, even though it fills a watchdog role, must take care to create a positive climate within which the managing director and staff can work effectively.

E. Managing/Delegation

While the board keeps the major authority in the agency, it delegates that authority to various others such as the managing director, support staff and committees. Therefore, the board does not directly supervise support staff since this role is delegated to the managing director. Committees who report to the board usually have one or more board members in their ranks.

A basic role of the board is to support, assess and clarify the service function. However, day-to-day service decisions are in the domain of the manager and the staff who are hired to deliver direct client service. At the same time, specific complaints about and dissatisfaction with client service delivery often end up before the board and must be dealt with fairly and properly.

F. Community Relations

It is very important for a board to represent positively, the total operation of the agency or service within the community. Included in this community relations function is the necessity of the board to communicate regularly with other boards in the local region, particularly if they offer similar or complementary types of programs.



WHAT IS THE BOARD MEMBER'S ROLE

A board will not be effective unless each member has a clear sense of how to participate. This means having enough knowledge, initiative and analytical ability to say what you do know, to ask when you don't understand, and to challenge when a decision doesn't seem right. It also means that board members have an obligation to seek out facts and to insist on proper discussion of weighty subjects.

A board member must be a full partner with the board chairperson and work with the rest of the board so that it functions as a unit to ensure the best possible service to the community. This does not mean that full agreement can be achieved on every issue, but once a decision is made, it should mean that there has been a full debate where every member's opinion has been received and considered.

Sometimes, in extraordinary circumstances, a conscientious board member may find it impossible to work in full partnership with the chairman and the rest of the board. Such instances must be resolved through compromise or even through resignation from the board. It is important, when such clashes exist, to think of the good of the agency and the community rather than to try to dominate the board.

The role we propose for a board member depends more upon attitudes and approaches than on specific modes of behavior. There are, however, particular ways you can adopt to become a useful board member. You can assist your agency by working to ensure that board meetings are effective. This requires a combination of organization skills and positive attitudes

You, as a board member, can best be used as an intelligent adviser. Like all effective advisers, you must draw on your own background and experience. You must also be thoroughly familiar with the situation on which you are commenting. As a board member, you want to help the agency meet the needs of its client group with sensitivity and good judgment. Your responsibility, then, is to see that this is achieved through fair, practical and ethical means.

The following two checklists provide a quick review of the duties, skills and attitudes needed by effective board members:

Duties and Skills of an Effective Board Member

- Attends meetings regularly
- Reads background material and minutes
- Is willing to serve on committees
- Speaks up when he or she has something to say
- Doesn't dominate the discussion
- Keeps comments relevant
- Listens when others speak
- Brings out quiet members

- Keeps confidential discussion confidential
- Is open to community and staff feedback
- Receives and gives constructive criticism
- Understands how to compromise
- Understands how to negotiate
- Gives praise when due
- Is prepared to make decisions



WHAT IS THE CHAIR'S ROLE?

The person chosen to chair the board has a key role and should be carefully selected. Take your time in making this decision. Ideally the chair should have a mix of dedication, understanding of and experience in the service itself, and people skills. The role carries considerable authority but it is authority largely based on personal qualities, powers of persuasion, and human relationships. The chair needs to have the ability to look at issues from more than one side and to be objective.

The chair must:

- Build a relationship with the board based on knowledge, trust and respect
- Control board meetings
- Facilitate the running of meetings so that all members are involved in discussion and decisions
- Involve all board members in committees and task forces
- Handle conflict situations professionally, fairly and promptly
- Work with the agency director so that accurate agency information gets out to members
- Cultivate a positive relationship with the managing director, support staff and board members
- Review all budgets and expenditures
- Represent the agency in and out of the community
- Be the spokesperson for the agency
- Direct praise and recognition to all involved

The chair's role is central but not a controlling role. Only in emergencies or crises does the chair exercise formal authority.

Decisions made by the chair should be ratified at the next board meeting. Generally, it is not wise to rate the chair's role from meeting to meeting but a vice-chairperson should be appointed (or elected).

The chair may delegate responsibilities to other board members but still must remain accountable for their performance. One typical way to share responsibility is to appoint board sub-committees each with its own chairperson. Although these sub-committees can, and often do, have staff representation, they are always accountable to the full board and must report to the board. The board chairperson should be an ex-officio member of every committee and task force but may choose not to attend committee meetings.

WHAT IS THE AGENCY DIRECTOR'S ROLE?

A. Definition Disagreement

There is often disagreement regarding the way the director relates to the board. Some see the director as totally in charge of the service and the staff existing simply to support the director's actions. Others view the director as a board employee who acts only as the board indicates. In this case, the director brings every decision or problem to the board for its direct involvement and approval. In many cases, the director is the 'nuts-and-bolts' manager of the agency with full decision-making authority regarding service and staff, but is accountable to the board which makes all policy and controls expenditure.

Sometimes clashes among board members, directors and service staff result from disagreements about roles or from the fact that roles have never been defined. If this occurs, staff often take sides with the resultant loss of morale and productivity. Soon the service itself suffers and clients lose out.

Struggles of this kind should be watched for and dealt with promptly.

What are the reasons for these disagreements?

- Each party thinks it best knows how to run the service.
- Boards have one policy viewpoint; staff has another.
- Boards do not have confidence in the director or the director does not have confidence in the board.
- New people, whether on boards or on staff, do not always understand the situation or the mechanics needed to handle it.
- Sometimes it really does involve a power struggle and the director does not wish to answer to the board.

What do you do when things like this happen?

Often, strong personalities find it difficult to work with one another. These situations are sometimes called 'personality clashes' and can often be resolved through:

- Careful listening
- An open mind
- Discussion between the director and the board
- Compromise
- A frank assessment of the supervising relationship held by the board

- A written outline of expectations and roles
- Conflict resolution approaches

B. Characteristics of a Workable Board

Many problems can be avoided altogether if the board is clear about its responsibilities and authority. The model we suggest, assumes that a board has a blend of differing personalities and talents which can, and should, be called on by the director. Such a board is responsible for:

- Setting general policy
- Budget review
- Advice regarding serious staff or service issues
- Initiative when there are serious break-downs in communications or service delivery
- Review of all reports
- Review of all hiring and firing
- Public statements

This type of board also takes care to become familiar with the service offered by keeping in close touch with the director and staff as well as with one another.



C. Director's Responsibilities

In this recommended model, the director:

- Derives authority from the board
- Is in charge of the agency's staff and services
- Represents the professional view of the agency to the community
- Explains the agency's manner of operation and the way this relates to its mandate
- Acts as a communication link between the board and staff
- Provides clear and regular and up-to-date communication to the board
- Clarifies board policies to staff and agency policies to the board
- Builds trust among all parties through open, accurate communication

The director's role is vital. When the job is properly carried out, the service is delivered professionally and efficiently and the agency becomes a credit to the board and to the whole community. An agency cannot provide services through boards, support staff and volunteers alone. Competent direction must come from the director.



WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE AGENCY'S STAFF?

Because this handbook cannot address all the managerial principles involved in running an agency, or in providing a community service, this section will deal with selected staff issues related to boards.

Staff members are charged with delivering an identified service to clients who require that service. They must have a clear idea of their job, be given the resources to perform it, work in a positive atmosphere, and be competently supervised. A good director will work with the staff as a team—not a team where no one questions, complains or criticizes, but one where all have a respected and acknowledged place and where all are working toward a common goal.

Staff-board relationships are more difficult to describe because there can be a variety of workable arrangements. In some cases, staff regularly and frequently communicates with any and all board members. In others, all communications go through the director and/or the board chair. Different styles have different strengths. The key ingredient is that the one your board chooses must be workable, understood by and acceptable to all concerned. It must also be appropriate for your community. When there is conflict, or the service breaks down, existing arrangements may have to be clarified or modified. It is important that staff always has the right to appeal directly to the board regarding serious agency issues.

Many staff people do not wish to spend much time on director-board issues. In fact, they may see this as some sort of job-related 'politics' and try to steer clear. They may wish to do what they were hired to do and leave the director and the board to act as a buffer. In cases like this, staff must not be cut off from important issues or denied access to directors and/or boards.

Morale improves when staff knows what is going on. Thus, it is important that board members feel free to visit the agency to talk with staff. Similarly, staff should participate in key board meetings, especially when issues they have worked on are discussed. It is also a good idea to have annual meetings when board and staff can interact informally.



WHAT IS THE VOLUNTEER'S ROLE?

Volunteers are the lifeblood of many community agencies. Local men and women provide untold hours of unpaid service and, in many instances, enable services to operate that could not otherwise exist.

Sadly, boards and agency staff quite often forget that volunteers are not obligated to assist in any way, that they are *giving* their time to the service and that they can withdraw that time at will.

The volunteer's role is to expand upon and add to the service supplied by the paid staff of the agency and by the board. Sometimes, all board members are themselves volunteers. Volunteers also form a strong support network within the community, a network that can assist the agency in various important ways and that often comes to the agency's assistance when its very existence is questioned.

Volunteers, especially those from service and fraternal organizations, often involve themselves in fund-raising on behalf of the agency. Other times they take on clerical tasks like stuffing envelopes, or they serve in advisory or consultative roles. They sit on committees, use their own resources and facilities for the agency's good, and sometimes even offer the services, time and skills of their own employees.



HOW DOES THE BOARD RELATE TO THE VOLUNTEER?

While these service volunteers are not involved directly with the board on any formal basis, effective organizations seek to have their volunteers feel part of the larger, collective effort. People do want to understand the workings of the agency and the services they are helping to deliver. They will experience more satisfaction when they are able to see how the various parts of the agency fit together. There is no hope of retaining volunteers who do not experience satisfaction with the role.

We do not suggest that volunteers should become deeply involved in an agency's operational issues or in the board's decision-making process, but an orientation program must include information about the board's function. As well, a good orientation offers opportunities for board members and volunteers to get to know one another. Board participation in the orientation is one way to do this. Social events sponsored by the organization can provide the opportunity for informal mixing. In addition, board and agency staff must acknowledge the unique contribution of volunteer workers on an on-going basis.



RECOGNITION AND APPRECIATION: A KEY BOARD FUNCTION

We all need praise. It is a human reaction to function better and to feel greater satisfaction when one's efforts are seen and valued.

Probably no single lapse of procedure occurs more frequently than failure to express appreciation for work well done. This may be because people who are busy usually do not take the time to recognize one another's efforts or achievements. As for the community, it can take the agency's service for granted.

All too often, if recognition comes at all, it is because of some extraordinary action that brings positive publicity to the board or agency. Appreciation is rarely given to those who are busily working at day-to-day tasks.

The effect of the failure to show appreciation takes many forms including resentment, depression, health problems, absenteeism, work badly done or not done at all, lateness, work-to-rule mentality, a critical or complaining attitude, even resistance of the system. All these things are signs of low morale and low morale affects the agency's service making the clients the losers.

Fortunately, the above problems can be prevented or resolved. For example:

1. Offer a verbal 'thank you' for contribution to the ongoing work of the board/agency.
2. Send written acknowledgement of continuous efforts on behalf of the board/agency.
3. Host a social gathering to acknowledge the collective efforts of board and agency--as formal as a dinner or as informal as coffee and dessert.
4. Flowers are a thoughtful gesture appreciated by nearly everyone.
5. Plaques, certificates, or small trophies convey a sense of appreciation and recognition.
6. Symbolic gifts can be tokens of acknowledgement of well-delivered service.
7. Offer staff or board development programs from time-to-time to show recognition of the desire to learn.
8. Recognize special needs. Gifts of supplies or equipment to help the cost-strapped agency operate more smoothly or comfortably convey a message of interest and concern. Such gifts need not be costly. Often small, inexpensive items are the ones not purchased.
9. Rotate or share opportunities to attend seminars, courses, conferences, etc., to allow all people from both board and agency to eventually participate in special events.

Thanks must be generated and rewards created from within an organization. They don't have to be elaborate or expensive. They can be light-hearted or serious; frivolous or practical; verbal or tangible. The point is that it is important to all levels of the organization that they be offered.



HOW DO YOU EVALUATE COMMUNITY SERVICES?

There is a danger that a community service may be started in order to fill a specific but not necessarily ongoing community role. Such a service may continue for years without fulfilling a necessary need. How do you know if your own agency or service is meeting a need? How do you know if you could do better?

A good way to find out, and a crucial part of delivering a service is to have periodic reviews of the agency. These should include an inspection of the director, the staff and also the board. Each separate part of an organization must be open to examination and ready to change.

Evaluation can be done in a variety of ways and at several different levels. This handbook can only offer some beginning ideas so what follows is but a brief and partial list of ideas for agencies.

Performance or Job Evaluation - *The examination of a staff member's role by others -- usually by the director*

It is recommended that every staff member receive such a review. It is also valuable when each board member's performance is assessed annually

Focused Role Evaluation - *Each part of the agency reviews its own function*

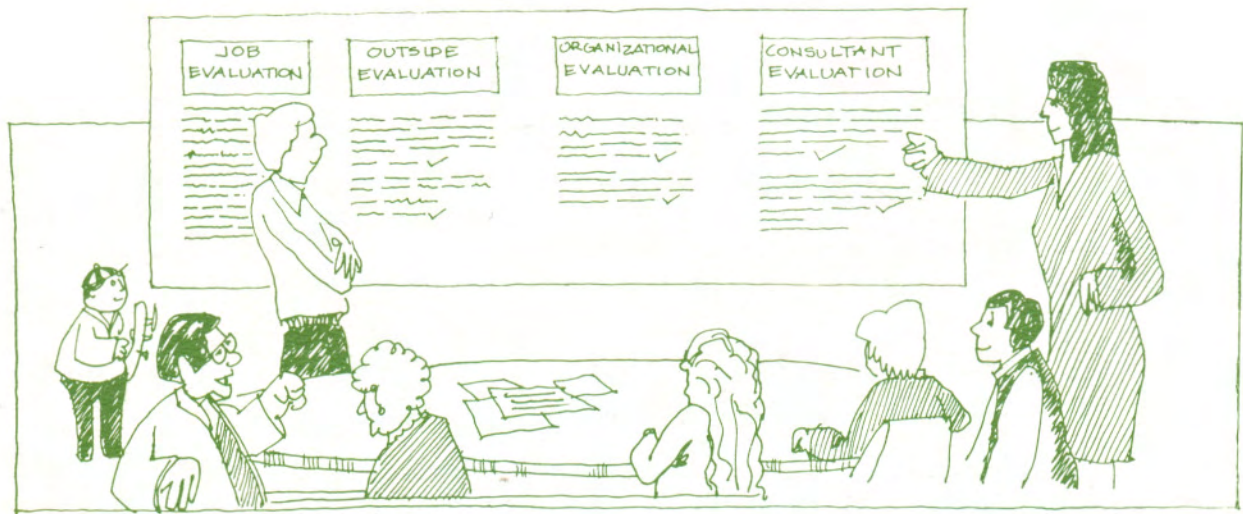
Thus, the board reviews its work, the director reviews his or her work, and the staff review their work. The emphasis is placed on the way each part of the agency works together in doing its tasks. The companion part of this kind of evaluation is for each separate arm of an organization to review the other branches, divisions, etc.

General Organization Evaluation - *The whole agency participates together in a review of the work*

The emphasis is both on the service provided to clients and on the relationship among board, director and staff. Usually all agency people meet together to share information and their different interpretations of problems and successes.

Outside Agency Evaluation - *Another agency from the community, or elsewhere, can be asked to review one or more parts of your operation*

The goal is to acquire a picture of how the agency measures up in the eyes of another agency experienced in the same field.



Consultant Evaluation - *A specialist in a particular field is asked to come in to review and assess one or more parts of the agency*

In this case, the agency has the money for this and sets the terms of reference. The consultant reports back with recommendations. It is usually best when all agency members participate in establishing the terms of reference and reviewing the results.

Formal Funder Evaluation - *The funder requests or requires a complete review at specified dates*

Usually the terms of reference are developed by both funder and agency. Generally, all parts of the operation are examined. Also, the views of other community members and professionals in the service field are included. This kind of an evaluation is sometimes undertaken by an outside consultant or staff member employed by the service funders.

Whatever route is chosen, evaluation must be done with a view to enhancing or improving the services delivered. The process must include input from all parts of the organization: the board, the director, the staff. It is usually important to include the funder or funders. An even more complete evaluation would include the perspectives of clients, the various referring agencies, and other co-working agencies in the community.

Unfortunately, evaluation is often perceived as a negative process where people expect to be blamed for failings or threatened with job loss. Care must be taken to prevent this attitude. Evaluation must be a step, a self-critical one, wherein all members of the agency team seek to find out how well they are doing and how they can improve themselves and their work. Outside consultants should share their findings, not just at the report stage, but also in an on-going way throughout the study process. Ideally, an evaluation leaves the agency stronger than before and more competent to do its work.

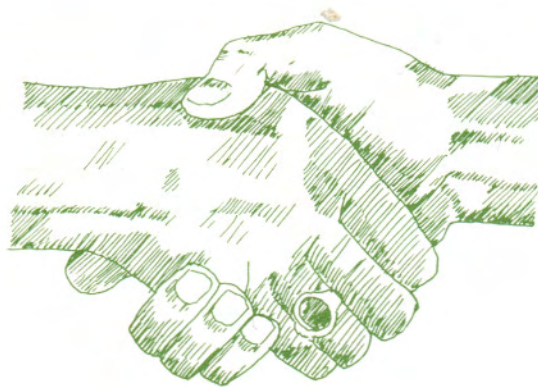
HOW DO YOU LEAVE A BOARD?

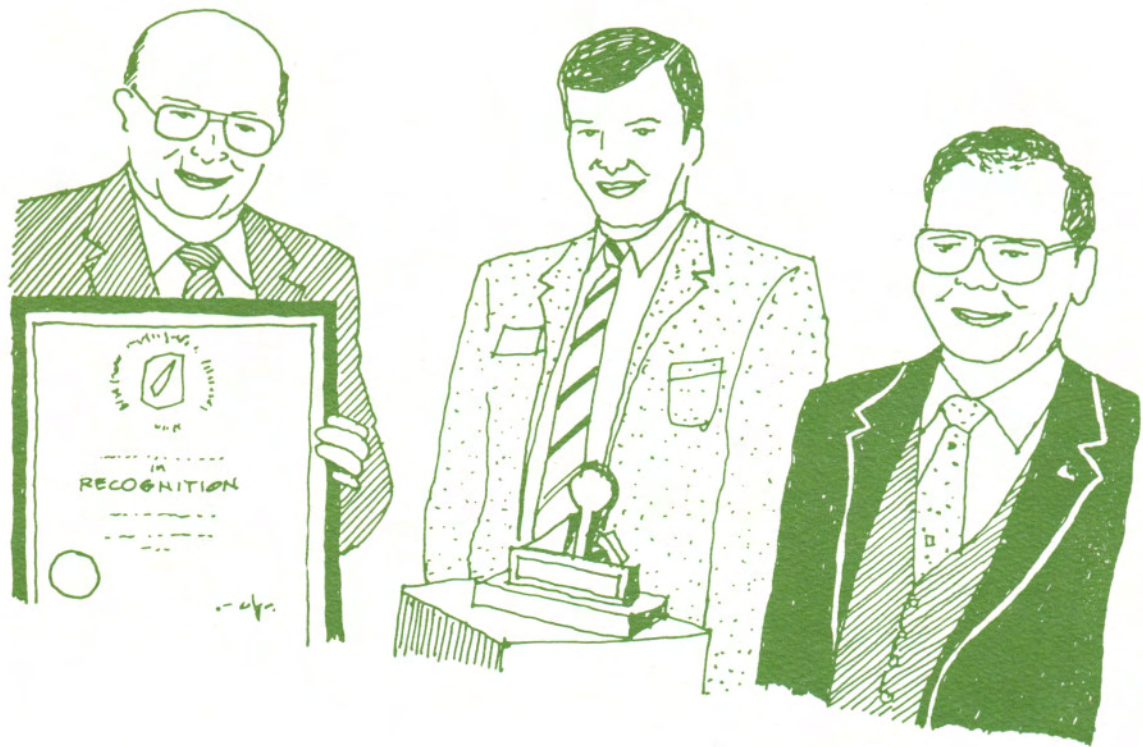
It is important that all board members be appointed for specific and limited terms of office. One way to do this is with a 1/3 annual turnover of board positions. This method ensures that new blood is always being introduced but, at the same time, with a carry-over of experienced members. Such a system also usually means that more people are receptive to board service since there is no long-term commitment.

Even if periods of board service are not specified, members may consider graciously stepping down after two or three years. There are a number of reasons for this:

1. Boards can become focused into only one way of looking at things.
2. Long-term boards can shut out newcomers with fresh ideas.
3. Boards can lose touch with one or more parts of their community.
4. The rest of the community may come to take the service for granted.
5. Boredom with an accompanying decrease in participation, may set in when one becomes too familiar with the process.
6. Personality conflicts on the board can become entrenched.
7. Board-director-staff relationships can become too routine.
8. The danger of a board falling into the control of a power-exerting chairperson increases.
9. Any frustrations that exist, will probably increase.

As a board member, you should not come to see your position as a never-ending right. Other people in the community must be given the opportunity to exercise their responsibility and to put their ideas and energies to work. Since constant member-renewal is necessary to keep up with changing needs and ideas, it is important for you to move on to new challenges and make room for others.





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SOME COMMON BOARD PROBLEMS AND THEIR REMEDIES

Boards are constantly faced with problems. While some of these are unique to one specific board, others are common from one board to another.

Readers should review the following suggestions to see if they make sense in their own communities. They are not presented as final answers; they are only suggestions for you to consider. The ultimate answers are always arrived at by caring, hard-working and sensitive people working on specific problems in their own unique context.

Problem 1 - *An issue discussed for an entire meeting is still unresolved*



- Go around the table one last time for comments; then call for a vote.
- Summarize the discussion to help board members sort out their thoughts and move towards a conclusion.
- Analyze the cause of the stalemate. Perhaps people do not thoroughly understand the issue through having missed meetings. Perhaps they have differing understandings of key words or of the language used to describe the issue. Perhaps someone is refusing to compromise through stubbornness or strongly-held beliefs.
- Sometimes it is helpful to ask each member to stop for a moment to put thoughts down in writing. Then use the written notes for the basis of a 'pro and con' analysis.
- Ask board members how they think the stalemate can be resolved.

To avoid such situations in the first place, you might try the following:

- Send out briefing material at least a week ahead of time.
- Prepare a purposeful agenda, established and agreed to prior to the meeting.

Problem 2 - *The board chairperson and/or agency director predetermine decisions*

- This problem should be placed on an agenda for a board meeting so that it can be openly addressed.
- Unless the offending practice is challenged at board meetings or at the annual meeting, no change can occur. Members must speak up.
- Strongly encourage every board member to comment before each decision is made.
- Stress the fact that the director has an advisory role to the board and to the sub-committees.
- Send a delegation of board members to meet with the director or chairperson and to express the members' concern.

Some avoidance tactics can be used to prevent such a practice.

- Have a clear policy about decision-making procedures. This would lay out which decisions must be made at board meetings.
- Use the executive committee for important decisions that must be made between board meetings.
- Use sub-committees to research issues, then to report to the entire board with recommendations for decision.
- Establish an agenda committee with decision-making procedures. All items on the agenda must be discussed before decisions can be made.
- At the beginning or ending of each meeting, go through a roundtable procedure where any unresolved issues can be brought forward.
- Hold one-day retreats or study sessions to evaluate the board's performance and to discuss problems and other important issues.

Problem 3 - *Tension and conflicts exist between the agency director and the board, or between the chair and the board*

- Tensions should be discussed openly at a board or staff meeting to determine the nature of the problem. Is it a personality, policy, or practice issue? Notify people beforehand that you will be doing this, then begin by reporting the reactions to your proposed action.
- Discuss tensions openly at a joint board-staff meeting. Again, notify all concerned that you will be taking this step. Ask for opinions on the cause of the tension and ideas on how it might be dealt with. Report what you were told in these regards as a starting point for the discussion. Do not fail to give your own view.

- Select an intermediary, respected by both parties, to discuss the issue with both parties - separately and together. This measure should only be taken if other less-threatening options have not succeeded.
- A clear policy of action should be in your mind in case no workable arrangement can be achieved. For example: major disagreements will be brought before a meeting where staff are in attendance; a vote will be taken; one or both parties will resign.
- Every chairperson and director should be aware of the danger of tensions and conflicts and should do research on ways to ease such problems and how to avoid them.
- Sometimes tensions exist because the agency director feels that the board does not allow him or her the sufficient exercise of authority. A clear definition of what the director does and what he or she does not do should be presented every time there is a personnel turnover on the board.
- Encourage the director to keep the board informed of the agency's work, of its successes as well as its failures and problems. It is a good idea to ask for an agency report from the director at every meeting.
- A board member training session helps members to understand their roles as well as the roles of the agency and its staff. Such a session also defines the role and duties of the chair.
- Committees' research, ideas and recommendations, if presented before a board meeting to the executive committee, allow for rough edges to be smoothed away and sometimes avoid conflict at the board meeting.

Problem 4 - *A talkative member takes over a meeting; or a quiet member does not contribute*



- Find out why the behavior occurs and seek jointly to develop a means of handling it. Is it because although the quiet person has good ideas, he or she is shy, or not prepared? Is it because the talkative person is nervous, or feels left out, or afraid of not being heard?

- Use a roundtable method wherein everyone is asked to speak during the meeting and at the end of the meeting. No one speaks twice until all have spoken once.
- Encourage and train the chair to conduct the meeting in an orderly fashion. This includes stopping talkative members and encouraging quiet ones. Any board member can participate in this.
- Assign members to sub-committees where there are fewer people involved. Match up people so that quiet ones have a chance to talk and talkative ones a chance to listen.
- It is important for the chair to listen carefully. When members repeat themselves regularly or wander a long way from the topic, the chair could interrupt and point out that the member has expressed himself or herself well. Then he could ask someone else to speak to the topic.
- Quiet members are more likely to express an opinion if they are not the first to speak. Begin the roundtable with someone else.
- The chair can encourage quiet members by asking leading questions. For example: "We haven't heard from you yet, Frank. What ideas do you have as to why this plan might succeed or fail?" However, always be cautious of embarrassing anyone.
- In extreme cases, a time limit can be set for each member to express himself/herself.
- New chairpersons should be offered a little bit of training in meeting control.
- The chair should try to stick to the agenda and to cover all its items. This assumes that the agenda is realistic.
- Depending upon the situation, a talkative member can be made the head of a sub-committee. There will then be the opportunity to report to the board and the responsibility to get input from other members. In this way, he/she will be guaranteed a chance to contribute and will feel that talents are being used.

Problem 5 - *One member intimidates others on the board or staff*

- Make sure that the aggressive member realizes what effect the behavior has on other people. This can be done in several ways: a) Discuss the problem behavior with the person to try to develop a plan to change it. b) Choose a board member or staff person, whom the member likes, to initiate such a discussion. c) Enlist the help of a community member, respected by the aggressive person, to discuss the problem behavior. d) Discuss the feelings openly in a staff or board meeting.
- Have a roundtable at the beginning and ending of each meeting. Make sure that the aggressive person answers last.
- Secret ballots can be used to deal with some issues raised in board meetings. The results will be openly announced and, in this way, the intimidating person will be able to take note of the opinions of others.
- Put a termination policy into place. In this way, a member can be suspended or asked to resign if good cause is shown and if all other members agree to it. This should be a last resort.

- Educate the board so they will understand the democratic process. That is, so they will remember that each person is entitled to an opinion, is allowed to express that opinion, and can vote as he/she sees fit.
- Remind the board often that it is only after all opinions are heard that a good compromise or consensus can be reached.
- Allow time for analyzing why a suggestion will or will not work. Insist that all members be involved in this process.

Problem 6 - *What the board wants and what the staff believes can be done are worlds apart*

- Have realistic goals and expectations.
- Begin each fiscal year with a joint staff-board meeting where open discussion takes place.
- Communicate; find out exactly where the staff stands.
- Find out what other agencies are doing in regard to goals, budgets, staff procedures, board policies.
- Find out what other agencies are accomplishing in regard to caseloads, service delivery, etc.
- Honestly analyze the board's expectations in the light of what you have learned about other agencies.
- Have 'clear-the-air' discussions where both board and staff can be heard.
- Ask for ideas, suggestions, solutions from staff.
- Ask for complete and honest information on service issues. If workers say they are overloaded, ask them to describe the situation with case examples. If referrals are down, ask for reasons. If there are client complaints, have them documented.
- Openly review past examples of failures or unmet expectations.
- Appoint a staff/board task force to investigate particular issues and suggested approaches. Ask for background facts and options at an open board meeting.
- Develop board training sessions using resource people from other agencies.
- Bring in funders to explain their policies and to outline the extent of their support.
- Ask staff to prepare written information on caseloads, budget concerns, failures and their expectations.
- Encourage frank discussion and assure staff that you will take their concerns under review.

Problem 7 - *Sometimes it is necessary to take an unpopular stand*

It is a problem for a board when it must take an unpopular stand. However, there are some constructive ways of dealing with this situation when it does happen.

I. TAKING AN UNPOPULAR STAND IN TERMS OF THE COMMUNITY

- Be sure that all possible information is reviewed before the decision is made and that all arguments are heard. Sometimes unpopular decisions are hasty ones where important information or arguments have been excluded.
- It may be necessary to call a community meeting to discuss the action. Plan and prepare for the meeting carefully. Allow the audience to express its concerns. Be able to answer questions intelligently.
- Publicize a controversial board action as a board decision not an individual one. Public announcements should not indicate individual names or votes.
- Within the bounds of good faith, publicize the reasons for an unpopular decision. Present pro and con arguments in an unbiased way.
- The director and chair should personally explain unpopular decisions to the staff.
- The chair should personally explain unpopular decisions to the community.
- Inform other affected community agencies of the action. Don't let it come as a surprise.
- The chair or director must provide personal support for each board member when these occasions arise.

II. MAKING A DECISION THAT IS UNPOPULAR WITH AGENCY STAFF

- Before the decision is voted on, the chair must check that members have all the facts available and must make sure that each member understands the issue.
- Meet with the agency director to discuss the implications before the decision is made. Thorough preparation can soften bad news, avoid poor decisions, and help to prevent ill feelings.
- Hold a joint board-staff meeting and explain the decision. Staff must know that the decision was arrived at only after full and open discussion.
- The chairperson/director must do a follow-up to examine the consequences of the decision and its effect on the agency's staff and services.

III. TAKING AN UNPOPULAR STAND AS A BOARD MEMBER

- Be sure you examine your stand and understand why you are taking it.
- Do not take this stand hastily. Sleep on it.
- Explain your position to fellow board members and to the agency director.
- Sometimes it's appropriate to explain your position in a public talk or in written form.
- Develop a support group of individuals who understand why you are doing what you are doing, and who can assist you in weathering the storm.

- If you are publicly criticized, either by individuals or the media, encourage the board chairperson to comment on your behalf regarding the right to dissent.

Problem 8 - *Emotional meetings which are draining occur and negative feelings carry over*

- Keep meetings short. If there is much to discuss, have more frequent meetings.
- Do not make decisions when people are tired or upset.
- Take a short break when emotional heat becomes intense.
- Once an issue which has aroused emotions has been thoroughly dealt with, the chair must seek to keep the issue closed. It cannot be allowed to surface again and again.
- Sometimes it helps to ask each member to write out his or her views or feelings. These written points can become the basis for discussion. The written word is not as inflammatory as the spoken word.
- Encourage each member to express feelings openly rather than to complain and spread negative feelings outside the meeting.
- Try to deal with problems and emotions expressed as soon as possible.
- Organize a workshop with an effective group leader to process the feelings and talk about remedial action. Let everyone know the issues ahead of time and indicate that all views will be heard.
- Call a special meeting to discuss feelings. This could be done at a retreat away from the agency. Encourage feelings to come out and ask everyone to state his or her own. This requires a chairperson who is sensitive to what is said, open to feelings, and able to handle the conflicts.
- Call members personally (or visit them) to hear the problems needing clarification or the points where reconciliation can be begun. With permission, record these points and discuss them at the next meeting.
- Table the inflammatory motion and ask members to think about it for the next meeting.
- Hold annual meetings between the chair or director and each board or staff member to obtain opinions regarding the agency, its management and operation.
- Educate board members as to the value of compromise and objective assessment of other people's ideas.
- Sometimes emotional meetings occur because the chair does not know when to step in and limit discussion. It is the chair's responsibility to keep control of the meeting.

Problem 9 - *Some members fail to attend meetings or don't participate when they do come*

- The chair should phone those who miss meetings to determine the cause. There may be a perfectly good reason; for example, death or illness in the family, impassible roads, etc. On the other hand, the member may not be interested in the role of board member, or may feel he or she doesn't have a proper handle on the job.

- Perhaps the real problem is in the meeting process itself. If this is so, identify what is wrong and take corrective measures. For example:
 - Shorten meeting duration.
 - Send out briefing material ahead of time.
 - Limit discussion.
 - Stay with the agenda.
 - Assign controversial issues, or those on which sides can be taken, to a sub-committee for research.
 - Bring in training and resource people.
 - Begin and end the meetings on time.
 - Consider relocating the meeting place if the present one is inconvenient to some members.
 - Begin the meetings at a time that is convenient to the majority.
- Bring the idea of problems with the meeting process to the board. Discuss the reason you have put it on the agenda. Ask for suggestions for improving the meetings.
- Ask non-participating members to assume important roles on sub-committees. Or, ask them to prepare a report for the next meeting, or to assist in interviews with staff or clients. That is, make them feel important members of the board.
- Adopt clear membership rules and make sure that all board members know what these are.
- Members who miss a stated number of meetings (without just cause) will be asked to resign from the board or will be automatically off the board.
- Do not be afraid to insist on the resignation process. Members who cannot or will not do the job should be asked to resign.
- Do your best to keep the agenda moving. Boredom is often the cause for lack of interest among board members.

Problem 10 - *Board fees, expenses and travel are questioned*

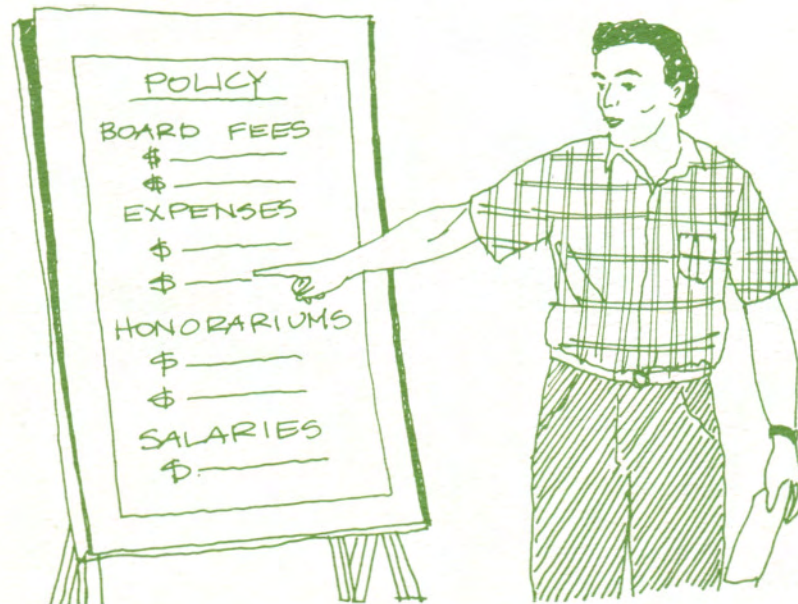
Some organizations pay board members an honorarium (a fee for sitting on the board) while others do not. Occasionally, in community agencies, someone representing an outside group will hold a board seat and will be paid by this group for doing so even though the rest of the board receive nothing. On other occasions, community members, the media, or others may query the advisability of paying honoraria, expenses and travel money to 'volunteers'.

- The board must set a clear policy regarding money and its expenditure by board members. The following questions should be considered:
 - Will board members receive payment for their duties?



- Is travel money available?
 - If so, who receives it? How often?
 - How much does it cover? What kind of travel? To and from meetings or just travel expenses to special affairs?
 - How is it paid?
 - What other expenses are covered?
 - Is money available for courses, training, conferences? For whom?
- Make the authorization for expense money a policy with rules. For example, a member may need two approvals for expenses and travel, and one of these must involve the board.
 - Expect regular reports by those who travel. These should outline why the travel occurred, who went, why, what was learned or accomplished.
 - Try to share these trips so that the same members do not always get the chance to go to a conference, planning meeting, etc.
 - Set a policy on the honoraria:
 - Is there to be one?
 - How much?
 - How will it be paid? On a per meeting basis or on a monthly or annual basis? Per meeting has advantages in keeping track of time and what the time costs; per month (or longer) makes it easier for bookkeeping purposes but makes it more important to keep careful track if meetings do not occur on a regular basis.
 - Do not expect members to finance agency work from their own pockets. Do insist that they document what money they have spent and provide receipts when possible.

- Repay expenses promptly.
- Adopt a policy on the use of agency resources: vehicles, rooms, phones, business equipment. These are not to be used for personal needs of members.



- Be open about expenses covered and the amount of honoraria. Notify the media of the agency's travel activities. Provide names, dates, destinations and reasons.

Problem 11 - *Staff salaries, expenses and travel are questioned*

- Salary schedules should be in writing and known to all agency members and staff.
- Salaries should be reviewed once a year.
- Procedures to determine and negotiate salaries must be in writing and known to all staff. For example, indicate how advertising is done, criteria for each salary step, whether or not there is a personnel committee, staff/board roles in setting salaries, etc.
- There will be fewer questions about salaries paid if these are in line with what other agencies are paying.
- Reward competence. Avoid automatic pay raises.
- Set a travel and expense policy.
- Indicate what is allowed for these in the budget.
- Ask the agency director to keep the board informed as to the purpose of each trip or non-routine expenditure, e.g., excessive long distance phone charges.
- In setting expense rates (mileage, etc.) use group community service agency or provincial government rates as guidelines.
- Expect properly documented expense accounts.

- Pay expenses promptly.

Problem 12 - *Negative rumors circulate about the agency or people connected with it*

- Find out if the story is true - or partly true.
- Trace the source of the rumor if possible.
- Take appropriate action. Publicize what was done.
- If the story is true:
 - Call a board meeting as soon as possible.
 - Decide on the action to be taken at the meeting. The director should attend this meeting.
 - If the issue concerns financial dishonesty or some other legal infringement, ask for the offending member's resignation.
 - Publicize this.
 - Make sure the board and staff know the full, true details before action is taken.
 - Contact key community people and provide accurate information.



- You may want to call a community meeting after first providing the media with full details.
- You may want to call a news conference.
- You may want to call for an audit of the agency's books.
- Appoint one spokesman to answer the media. No one else should speak to the question.
- If the rumor is not true:

- Enlist the assistance of the media in counteracting the rumor. Do this by putting all the facts before them, preferably at a news conference or board/media meeting.
- The same steps should be taken to inform members, community, etc., as are taken when the rumor is true.
- Those persons who started the rumor, or who are actively spreading it around, should be made aware of the board's intention to take official action.

Problem 13 - *Conflicts arise over the hiring or firing of directors or staff*

- Job openings should be publicly advertised.
- Interview all reasonable candidates.
- Use a standard criteria sheet to score each interview.
- There should be board representation on the interview committee.
- Hiring criteria that can be announced should be in place.
- Follow up letters of reference with personal calls. Don't assume that referees are completely honest in what they say in the letter.
- There should be a written contract which clearly defines money matters, job description, staff benefits, termination procedures, etc.
- Do not lay yourself open to action from the Department of Labor or the Human Rights Commission. Make sure you know the law as it pertains to hiring and firing.
- Adopt a clear termination procedure stating the following:
 - Who has the right to fire an employee
 - How it shall be done (letter, oral)
 - Notice required
 - Reasons that cause an employee to lose his/her job
 - Appeal procedure
- Board and director should review termination cases. Each should review the file privately, then sit down together to discuss what should be done. People who are fired have the right to talk to the board or the termination committee.
- In the case of the director being the one who is terminated, the entire board should be involved.
- Staff members (including directors) who do not meet expectations, should receive oral and written warnings and should be told of areas where improvement is required. They should know the consequences if problem behavior is not corrected.

- Staff who leave on their own must give proper notice. The notice period required should be part of the written contract.
- Staff should receive annual oral and written performance appraisals. These should become part of their files and should be reviewed at the time of termination.
- Copies of all written appraisals should be available to the staff member involved.
- Boards usually do not involve themselves in agency staff matters but must keep informed about these things.

WHAT MAKES A BOARD SUCCESSFUL?

Board experience can be rewarding and challenging or it can be a frustrating experience. Quite often the type of board experience you have is the direct result of how much you yourself put into the task. Occasionally, people find themselves on boards where they cannot function in a positive manner.

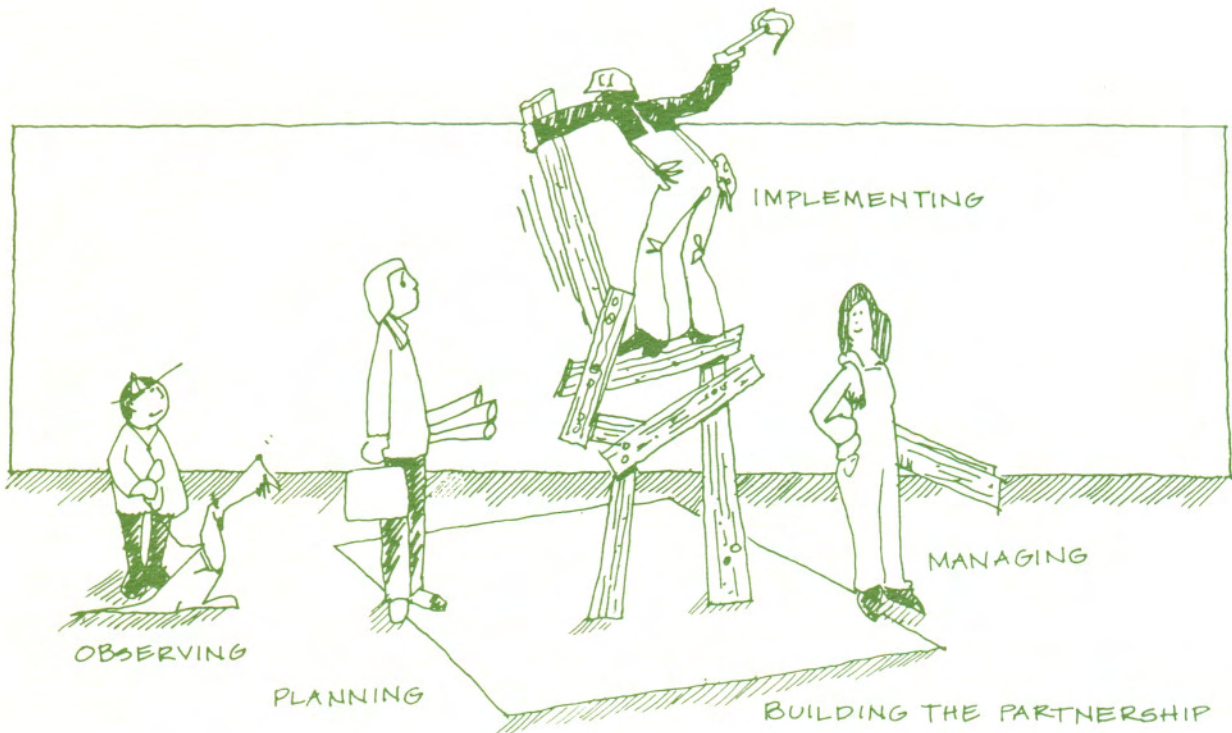
What makes a good board? What should you expect from a board of directors experience? What kind of a board leaves you feeling that the time and commitment you spent were worthwhile?

1. The board as a whole has a *unity of purpose*.
2. A *clear policy manual* to help deal with board matters is available.
3. The board moves *smoothly* toward *agreed upon goals*.
4. Members have *open minds* and are *willing to listen* to new ideas.
5. There is a feeling of getting somewhere. Satisfaction is tied in to *board accomplishments*.
6. Board members feel that they play an *important part* and have *input* to decision-making.
7. When members *agree to disagree*, hard feelings do not linger.
8. There is a sense of '*group wisdom*'.
9. Members receive *recognition and appreciation*.
10. There is a sense of *learning, advancement of personal skills, self-worth*.
11. A *positive relationship exists* with other boards and services.
12. There is a *team approach* built on *fairness, trust, respect and responsibility*.



CONCLUSION

Being a volunteer board member of a community service agency is an important role and, for many northerners, a very satisfying experience. Part of the satisfaction comes from the hard work of delivering a service, resolving problems and knowing that people are being helped. However, good board experiences don't just happen. They result from having a vision to improve things and then signing up for the job. Your community has a place on a board for you. Your community needs you.



The members of the Northern Alberta Development Council are pleased to present this handbook for use by northern residents.

Norm Weiss, MLA, Chairman, Fort McMurray

Joe Molho, Vice Chairman, Swan Hills

Mary Bennett, Elk Point

Gene Dextrase, High Level

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