Best Practices in Board-Staff Relationships
Mutual Aid Call
December 12, 2012

Having a good working board-staff relationship makes your organization’s direction definitive, operations smooth and programs and initiatives more effective. Rob Sadowsky, Dan Grunig and Chris Morfas have all worked on those relationships from both sides, as executive directors and as board members, and on this call they discussed strategies to strengthen your board-staff relationship.

Our Panelists:

Rob Sadowsky
Executive Director

Dan Grunig
Executive Director

Chris Morfas
Board Chair

Board roles and staff roles

• The board is responsible for setting the priorities of the organization: its mission, vision, values and goals. It’s heavily involved in fundraising, as well.
• “Your board is your policy center,” says Rob. “They’re the ones thinking at a high level, trying to push the organization in ways to make it better.” They have a role as a sounding board and leadership. In most groups, they are responsible for fundraising and making valuable connections. They provide oversight, evaluation, innovation and guidance but not management or personnel decisions (except for those who report directly to them, like the executive director).
• “The board is the ‘what’ and the staff is the ‘how,’” says Dan. “The board, for example, would decide, ‘We want to get across that river and we have this much budget to do it.’ It’s up to the staff to do an analysis to see if a tunnel or a rope swing or a cannon is the best way to do it, and then implement it.” It helps to have a clear definition of those roles.
• “It’s the board’s role to establish the long-term strategic direction of the organization — its mission, vision, values and goals,” says Chris. “When you get more into the work plan of short- and medium-term objectives, that’s where the staff really comes into play.” Staff coordinate, listen and give input to the process of strategic planning, too.
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- Staff implements the strategic direction that the board agrees upon.
- “Staff has the role of providing a reality check upon the board, in terms of staff’s understanding of what the organization’s resources are, the environment in which it is operating, the opportunities that are in front of the organization,” says Chris.

**Communicating effectively**

- “I have weekly phone call meetings with the board president, and at least once a month we meet in person,” says Rob. “We have monthly executive committee meetings, which tee up our board meetings and helps slate upcoming issues.”
- Make your board meetings about decisions. “I think it’s a way of showing respect for the value of your volunteer board members’ time,” says Chris. “You’re bringing them together for a reason, to make decisions, and making decisions requires everyone to be prepared in advance.” Get meeting materials out to board members at least a week in advance. Foster an environment where staff treat board members with respect and use them efficiently.
- Have multiple presenters at meetings. “It shouldn’t be the board chair or the executive director dominating the meetings,” says Chris. “Always try to have three to five different board members presenting individual items over the course of the meeting to empower people and encourage participation.”
- Streamline your reporting. Instead of using time to present staff reports during a meeting, have a running Google document/spreadsheet with items available ahead of time. BTA has a data-driven dashboard (a straightforward one-page tool) to show progress and metrics on the objectives the organization trying to reach.
- Communication strategies differ from organization to organization. “It’s important to consider the geographic dispersion of the board members,” says Chris. “How often you actually get together face-to-face is an important consideration in terms of the communications and expectations you can establish.”
- Consider transparency as a mechanism. “We do a report to staff or to the board, it goes to board and staff,” says Rob. “We share financial statements with board and staff, we share board minutes with board and staff. We’d rather be transparent about that process. The board can still enter into executive session.”
- Have rules about communications. BTA has all staff-to-board communications go through the ED or board president. On the other side, individual board members should not issue orders to the executive director; they are supposed to make decisions as a group but can follow up on implementation questions.
Board development

- Your board nomination and development processes are extremely important. “Just like you should have a transition or succession plan for key staff members,” says Rob, “your board should also have a succession plan. If you’re on a board, or as staff, you should know right now who your next board president, vice president, secretary and treasurer are.”
- BTA has a board nominating committee which helps develop the future leadership of the organization.
- Bicycle Colorado has used a matrix in the past to determine what their organization needs and the skills that board members bring and aspects of representation (diversity of background, ethnicity and location, e.g.). “We’re moving away from a chart of what people have done and are looking at what they can do,” says Dan. “It’s more important to have a very excited and committed board member than to just plug a hole because you need a lawyer or an accountant.”
- “As the board starts to transition away from the roles as a decision maker and an implementer,” says Rob, “the people who are really good at serving on that collective form of government may not be the people who are really good at being the next stage of the board. The board needs to be conscientious about what skill level, what capacity, what kind of values and opportunities the board has as the organization grows.” The same goes for staff. Maybe the best person to lead an organization as a sole staff member is not the same person you need to run the organization when it has seven staff members.
- Think about transition plans. “Your board is in transition, whether you know it or not,” says Chris. “If you have the same board members you had one or two years ago, your board is transitioning towards obsolescence. If you have significant turnover, that transition is more apparent.” As executive staff and as board, assess your board as it is, and continue to identify those individuals who will increase the board’s capacity.
- Spend 10-15 percent of your time on board development communicating and developing relationships with board members and prospects; have a board development committee that identifies strengths and opportunities for board members; share individual successes among board members; and take a position on the board of another organization to guide your work.

For many board members who haven’t been raising funds, they’re kind of intimidated. We’ve been involving them in thank-you calls to larger donors. We’ve worked with them a basic script to get into the conversation, but are giving them a chance to hear from those donors what’s important to them and why they support Bicycle Colorado. That’s a nice first step in terms of them being able to reach out, communicate, and learn to speak about the organization.

— Dan Grunig
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Systems that work for three organizations:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BTA</th>
<th>Bicycle Colorado</th>
<th>CalBike</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board Meeting Frequency</td>
<td>Six full board meetings per year, one of them is a day-long full staff-board retreat</td>
<td>Quarterly full board meetings, monthly executive committee</td>
<td>Six times per year, full board meeting (two in-person)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Committees</td>
<td>Active executive committee; committee chairs participate in executive committee meetings; committee role is to tee up decisions for the full board</td>
<td>Aside from executive committee, organized as task forces; form around an issue and disband when work is done; staff can get involved if their work is required.</td>
<td>Mixed success; sometimes the organization needs to respond quickly, and committees work more slowly; only have them if they're effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>Use dashboard tool, reports available before meetings</td>
<td>Written and read in advance</td>
<td>Shared via Google doc or spreadsheet prior to meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>15 FTE, 22 board members</td>
<td>8 FTE, 19 board members</td>
<td>2 FTE, 12 board members</td>
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Managing the transition as your organization grows and changes:

- Developing a board position description is helpful. “Lay out the roles and responsibilities and what’s expected of a board member in terms of time and financial commitment,” says Dan. It’s better to find out early if someone can’t make the commitment.
- Engage the board in strategic planning. For CalBike, this served to establish expectations for staff and board, deliverables and metrics. The board-staff relationship changed to a shared understanding of the organization’s direction for the board.
- When you have a good working board that hires their first executive director, sometimes the board expects that one person to do what everyone was doing collectively. Communication is key in helping the board step back without entirely stepping away. Some board members may enjoy the implementation role they had as part of a working board and may find it hard to relinquish those responsibilities to staff.
- Regrouping through strategic planning sessions and facilitated retreats can give the staff and board guidance on their changing roles.
We require our board members to buy a table — or sell a table — at our annual fundraising event, and we ask them to come up with another $1,000 in cash, either themselves or through friends. I tell our board members, “You should write a check large enough that, if you have to explain it to your spouse, you’re a little bit nervous about it and it makes you sweat.” That’s how big it should be.

— Rob Sadowsky

If a committee is not robust, if it doesn’t have a backbone or if it’s not proactive, then you’re either going to have important policy decisions that affect the reputation of the organization and its allocation of resources falling to the executive director, which can be risky, or it backs up to the board, which can be overly cumbersome.

— Chris Morfas

Additional Resources:

- Rob’s presentation materials from the 2012 Alliance Retreat in the Alliance Resource Library
- Board development resources in the Alliance Resource Library
- Board evaluation tools (matrices) in the Alliance Resource Library
- Board development resources from ManagementHelp.org
- Board resources at GrantSpace.org
- Your state or local nonprofit association