

Building an Effective Board

In my work over the years with the boards of hundreds of nonprofit and social impact organizations, it is clear that one of the most important determinants of success is the quality of leadership – at both the board and staff levels.

Patrick Lencioni, in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* lists the five behaviors that hold groups back from achieving high performance. I've adapted his approach slightly, because I prefer to focus on the positive traits that are necessary for success.

What does an effective board or staff team look like?

First of all, any effective team dynamic requires Trust. And trust is not something you can get by saying "trust me." That's what used car salesmen are prone to demand, and we know how well that works. Trust must be earned, and the best way to gain trust is to show someone that you trust them.

Second is Constructive Conflict or Engagement. Most of us don't like conflict and will do just about anything to avoid it. But the counter-intuitive thing about conflict is, the more we do it, the easier it gets.

Next is Commitment. We certainly want to have passionate people serving our organizations, and it's important for board members to support the cause financially. But saying you're committed and actually being engaged are two separate things.

Which is why the flip-side of commitment is the next element for a dynamic team -- Accountability. Without holding everyone on the board accountable for following through with their commitments, it's hard to get anything done, let alone build the kind of culture that will attract other high-performance board members.

The final piece is to maintain a Focus on Results. Too many boards and other working groups get hung up on process. Process is important, but it's the outcomes that really matter.

So what does it take to create a high performance team?

- Trust requires that we be vulnerable
- Constructive Conflict requires us to demand debate
- Commitment comes from forcing clarity and closure to discussions
- Accountability requires that we confront difficult issues and situations
- Focus on Results requires the group to stay focused on collective outcomes, rather than on individual agendas

In the next article on strategic thinking, we'll see how a clear set of strategic priorities can help keep everyone on track and focused on the success of their nonprofit organization.

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