

THE NGO AND ITS BOARD

The NGO board is a resource — a people resource

A strong, well-informed board is fundamental to any NGO's success. Whether the board is advisory or administrative, whether it has only a policy-making role or has also assumed operational duties, the board has the power to exert a positive – or negative – influence on everything the NGO hopes to accomplish.

Non-profit institutions that have achieved a sound financial base of support are almost always those with a dedicated and active board. Conversely, an NGO having difficulty developing programmes or raising funds will invariably have an indifferent board whose members are distracted by other commitments or unwilling to accept responsibility for the growth of the organisation.

Being asked to serve on the board of an NGO is often the mark of personal achievement or professional success. It is one way the local community can confer honor and say to the individual that he or she is of value. In return, the individual accepts a role of communal leadership through his or her service on the board.

Yet NGOs should look for more than a prestigious "name" when they fill a seat on their board. First and foremost, they should require commitment from board members. Commitment entails interest in the entire organisation. Although a particular programme may be of special interest to an individual board member, he or she must also be able to see the organisation as a whole. Commitment means that board members are themselves contributing to the extent of their ability. And finally commitment means an eagerness on the part of board members to reach out to the community as advocates for the organisation.

Board members who lack that commitment, or who are only lending their names and prestige, will not strengthen the organisation. NGOs require board members who are willing to roll up their sleeves and work for the organisation, and the smaller the NGO, the more likely it will require direct involvement by its board.

The ideal board is made up of skilled and committed persons actively involved in the organisation or the community and sincerely dedicated to the purposes of the NGO. It should represent a broad range of community interests and expertise: for example, business, community service, financial, legal, philanthropic, and political.

SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING BETTER NGO BOARDS

- Be practical but also creative in selecting Board members. Don't be afraid to try the unconventional!
- Board members need to know what is expected of them – they should know this before they accept the position. Periodic articulation of board responsibilities or specific member tasks should be an ongoing part of board meetings.
- Board members need to have access to the organisation's charter and by-laws, current programme planning documents, proposals, budgets, revenue/expense statements, etc. If such information is not available on a timely and regular basis, it is incumbent on board members to insist that this material be provided. Without adequate information, the board risks relinquishing its policy-making role; nor can it easily or effectively provide direction, evaluate programmes, or otherwise discharge its oversight responsibilities.
- Boards need to be kept informed about organisational needs. A "wish list" of resources required should be available to board members and periodically updated. If the board is to help secure resources, it must be aware of what is important in terms of the NGO's current and long-term needs.
- Boards should not be undervalued. Like the NGO's staff, members or volunteers, the board has a valuable contribution to make. The "assets" of each board member need to be recognised and considered a part of the organisation's human resource base.
- Recognise outstanding board members. Special awards, presentations or social events provide opportunities to show appreciation.
- The term of office for board members should be limited in order to permit the infusion of new ideas and to prevent leadership stagnation.
- When a board is not fulfilling its responsibilities, it is sometimes easier to change the outlook of individual members than to change the membership itself. NGOs should take advantage of opportunities offered in the country and throughout the region for training sessions, seminars, retreats, and similar learning experiences for board members.
- Remember the three "G's" of NGO board membership: **Give, Get, or Get off!**

BOARD MEMBERS SHOULD BE CHOSEN ACCORDING TO HOW THEY CAN HELP — AS DONORS, FUND RAISERS, POLICY-MAKERS, OR ADVISORS. EVERY MEMBER SHOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO OFFER, BE IT MONEY, TIME, EXPERTISE, OR VALUABLE CONTACTS. BOARD MEMBERS MUST BE WILLING TO BACK THEIR COMMITMENT WITH DONATIONS — OF SERVICE OR DOLLARS. NGOs CANNOT APPORD THE LUXURY OF INACTIVE BOARD MEMBERS.