

Board and Senior Staff Relationships

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The purpose of this paper, like others that will follow as part of an occasional series from the Halton Nonprofit Network, is to encourage dialogue and provoke discussion around key issues confronted by the nonprofit sector in Halton.

Board and Senior Staff Relationships

No matter what style of governance that a nonprofit adopts, there is perhaps no relationship as important to its effective functioning, if it has staff, as the relationship between the Board of Directors and its senior staff person.

In recent months, folks on the Coordinating Committee and the Coordinator of the Halton Nonprofit Network have heard tales from both Board volunteers and senior staff from a variety of nonprofits about staff-Board of Director relationships that have, in the vernacular, “gone south.” Sometimes we hear about this “after the fact”, i.e., as in “woops - she [or he] is no longer with the agency” or “their Board Chair resigned.” More often, however, we hear about deteriorating relationships in quiet side conversations at meetings and community events.

These relationships-gone-bad usually remain a whispered reality, agonized over by Boards in “in camera” sessions or in quiet meetings among Board members between Board meetings; senior staff often quietly share their worries with trusted colleagues. Too often, they remain “elephants in the room”, situations we do not like to acknowledge and very often know not what to do with.

The Board – senior staff relationship, no matter what the style or model of governance, is critical to the healthy functioning of a nonprofit. When it deteriorates, organizational health is at risk, not to mention the mental health of staff and volunteers both.

What are the Causes of Conflict?

a) Lack of Role Clarity

Often, conflict between senior staff and a Board comes down to lack of role clarity, or, where there is clarity, a failure to stay within role boundaries. Symptoms of this can include Boards micro-managing staff, or a lack of clear position descriptions for senior staff and/or Board members.

b) Weak Board Orientation

Board orientation is a critical element in determining that Boards of Directors understand their role, how decisions are made, where an organization has drawn the line between policy and operations and the staff accountability mechanisms that are intended to reassure Boards that things are running as they should.

c) Rogue Board Members

Most people in nonprofits have seen what a rogue Board member can do to an organization. They tie up meetings, make unreasonable demands of staff, offer criticism of staff without suggestions for improvements, and attempt to create “factions” within a Board, etc. And, because we tend to be conflict-averse, they are rarely managed effectively at the Board table, so the destructive behaviours continue.

Boards that evaluate their own effectiveness and performance on a regular basis have an advantage here, because there is an opportunity to name inappropriate or problematic Board behaviour.

d) Untrustworthy Senior Staff

Untrustworthy staff are just as problematic as rogue Board members. Although we would hate to admit it, many of us in the nonprofit field have sometimes seen senior staff operate outside the scope of their authority, hold back information, and, on occasion, outright lie to their Boards. When these behaviours are discovered, the key relationship of trust (backed up by effective accountability processes) is ruptured, too often beyond repair.

e) Staff-Driven Organizations

Over the years, veterans in the nonprofit sector have seen many organizations that, despite regular Board meetings, are essentially staff-driven with Boards, by and large, rubber-stamping staff recommendations and actions. Some senior staff see their Board as a body to be “managed” (sometimes even as an obstacle to be overcome) rather than as a senior partner with the responsibility to provide oversight and to set strategic direction. The problem with this, however, is that if something goes wrong, it is the Board that “is legally responsible for the actions of the organization, including those of its employees and volunteers.” (Dalhousie College of Continuing Education: The Legal Responsibilities of Boards, 2013)

f) Ineffective Staff Accountability Processes or Performance Management

Whatever model of governance is used, accountability processes and/or performance management need to be effective. In talking to senior staff in the nonprofit sector in Halton, it is surprising to hear that many have never had a performance review. Even where regular monitoring reports are made to a Board, some senior staff still feel that they have no idea what their Board thinks of their performance.

Having said this, Boards can fall into the trap of seeing performance management or review as an event rather than an ongoing process. Handled effectively, there should never be a “surprise” when staff and Board sit down to discuss performance. Issues should be raised when they occur or become evident, and, where regular monitoring reports are being received, policies that govern that reporting amended as appropriate.

g) Failure to Identify Board Expectations of Senior Staff

Staff members can only fairly be judged on their performance when Boards are clear (and, we would add) reasonable in their expectations. Strategic and operational plans both need to be clear about what is expected and the Board must also be clear about the standards of conduct it expects from its senior staff.

h) Personal Agendas and Fiduciary Responsibility

When organizations incorporate, their Boards take on a fiduciary responsibility that requires individual Board members to put the interests of the organization ahead of their own interests. If this does not occur, one can see situations arise where staff are being asked to operate against the best interests of an organization, and we have seen this cause real tension between Boards and staff.

If as a Board member or a senior staff person you see or experience any of the above in your organization, it may be time to take stock of how effectively governance is being exercised in your nonprofit. These are not the only symptoms that your governance effectiveness needs to be assessed, but they are important.

HNN is building a model that will allow nonprofits in Halton to access support resources for situations such as those outlined above, so be in touch with us if you wish to problem-solve. E-mail coordinator@haltonnonprofitnetwork.ca or check out our on-line resources at www.haltonnonprofitnetwork.ca

Source:

Dalhousie College of Continuing Education: The Legal Responsibilities of Boards, 2013, last sourced July 31, 2014:

<http://www.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/continuingeducation/Improving%20Non-Profit%20Governance/Legal%20Responsibilities%20of%20Boards%202013.pdf>