



Communicating with the Board

By Richard L. Welsh, Ph.D.

As a proud father, I have actively followed Kathy's blog and been naturally impressed with her ability to articulate helpful insights in the area of non-profit administration and development. After all, I did admit that I am her father.

Having spent most of my career as a chief executive officer of non-profit organizations, I always have opinions about what Kathy writes, and we have had many conversations about the experiences that we have had. She has invited me to consider writing a guest blog based on one of those conversations.

I have often considered the relationship between the CEO of a nonprofit and his or her Board as similar to the relationship between spouses. In one of my CEO positions, I was definitely attracted to the job by the opportunity to work closely with the man who was the chairman of the Board. However, most of the time, the relationship might be characterized more like that of an "arranged" marriage. The partners may not have chosen each other and may not be "in love" with each other, but they are committed to making the relationship work.

The relationship between a nonprofit CEO and his or her Board, like the relationship between spouses, will work most effectively if it is based on good communication and trust. Typically, a Board depends on the flow of information from the chief executive to do its job.

Board members are not usually knowledgeable about the technical areas addressed by the nonprofit agency. They are not around the agency on a frequent basis and do not have a good sense of how things operate. When they are there, they often feel that they need to keep an arm's length from the staff less they cross a line into inappropriate communication. In most areas, Board members have to depend on the chief executive for the information they need in order to carry out their responsibilities for policy-making and even their responsibility for evaluating the CEO.

To facilitate the Board's effective decision-making, the CEO has to communicate with the Board thoroughly and effectively. This includes both the good news and the bad. In my experience, I developed the operating principle that if there was bad news that the Board needed to hear, they needed to hear it from me. This was an important element in establishing and maintaining the level of trust that was needed in order to make the relationship between the executive and the Board work effectively.

Similar to a marriage, there has to be a level of trust that allows a spouse to tell one's partner even the most difficult truth. Nothing undermines that trust more than the discovery that one's partner has kept a problem secret. Once a CEO has given the Board a reason to wonder if there are problems that have not been shared or if there is more to the story, it is difficult to put that possibility out of one's mind in all future communications.

The success of a nonprofit organization depends on a Board that makes correct and courageous decisions in the best interest of the organization. Its ability to do so depends entirely on the trust that it has in the CEO and on the effectiveness of their communications.

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