

## **BOARDSMANSHIP ROLE AND RELATIONSHIPS**

**Nancy Sylvester, MA, PRP, CPP-T**

In this country, we treat being a board member much like many other fields of endeavor such as parenting and leadership. We assume that if you have the **desire** to be one and know how to **become** one, then you will know how **to be a good one!** Unfortunately, all around us we see examples of how this theory fails. I often have met board members who wanted to be a good board member but didn't know how or went about it in the wrong way.

In this article we will review the overall role of the board and then focus on a key success factor of effective board governance: the board/staff relationship.

### **ROLE OF THE BOARD**

The board exists to represent the ownership of the organization. Throughout every meeting, the board makes decisions and governs based upon what is best for the entire organization, not just one part of the organization. So as a member of a Park District Board of Commissioners, your role is to constantly, throughout every meeting, be focused on what is best for your entire park district. That is much more difficult than it sounds!

It is very possible that a single decision the board of commissioners makes may be wonderful for a specific focused area of the district and at the same time be detrimental to the entire district. In this kind of situation, the board member must constantly think of what is best for the entire park district.

What makes this focus on the entire district difficult is that often district members with a vested interest will do all they can to pull the commissioner into the detail of their one area of interest. They do this in part because, as an individual resident, they are not charged with doing what is best for the entire park district.

When a board member finds himself pulled into thinking about one area of interest, it is extremely difficult to take a large step back and look at what is best for the entire district. But, to fulfill his responsibility as a board member, it is a necessity.

One way to assist with this is to remember that the role and responsibility of the board commissioner is to make decisions based upon the mission and vision of the district. Throughout the making of every decision, each commissioner must examine whether or not what is being decided upon fits within the mission of the organization. If it does, then each commissioner must next ask: Does this decision fit into the long term vision of the park district? A "no" answer to either the mission or vision question should be considered a deal breaker or, at best, something that takes the commissioners back to the drawing table.

Another way to assist with this is to create a checklist of critical factors that must be met before making any major decision on behalf of the ownership of the park district. This way, the board can make sure that they remember all key parts of the district when making decisions.

## **BOARD/STAFF RELATIONSHIP**

An observation I have made in my more than twenty years as a board trainer is that one of the greatest impacts on the effectiveness of a board is the board/staff relationship. Understanding that relationship and the importance of a good relationship can help a board move in the direction of a positive relationship with the staff.

One of the tools that I use to help understand the appropriate board/staff relationship is an hour glass. At one end of the hourglass is the staff, at the other end is the board. In the middle, where the hour glass gets thin, one will find the executive director and the chairman of the board. The hourglass represents the concept that the only way from the board to the staff is through the chairman and the then executive director. The only way from the staff to the board is through the executive director and the board chairman. So if a board member has an assignment for a staff member or a complaint about how the staff member is doing his or her job, the only way to express that assignment or complaint is through the chairman of the board. The chairman will take it to the executive director and then the executive director will handle it as he or she sees fit. The converse is also true. If a staff member has a complaint about how the executive director is handling a particular issue, or the job in general, the only way to express that issue is through the executive director who may choose to take the issue to the chairman of the board, or not. If the staff member does not like the answer given to them by the executive director, the most they can do is request a meeting with the executive director and the chairman of the board. If the staff member deems it to be a major issue that must be dealt with, after trying to work through the issue with the executive director, the staff member may request a meeting with the chairman of the board.

There is one exception to the hourglass concept. If the issue is harassment, the Supreme Court has ruled that the person being harassed does not have to directly confront the harasser. Therefore, for example, the employee who believes they are being harassed by the executive director, can go directly to the chairman of the board with that complaint.

The hourglass is also a great visual reminder that the board of commissioners has only one direct report: the executive director. Every other staff member of the park district reports to the executive director. It also is a great visual reminder that the staff members do not all report to the board and so the staff member should not go to a commissioner with his or her complaint. Therefore, when a board member is confronted by a staff member with a complaint that is not a harassment issue, the board member should stop the conversation and direct the staff member to go back to the executive director to work out the issue. Equally important is that the executive director should make it very clear to the staff that if they are given an assignment or a complaint

by a board member that they should bring that assignment or complaint directly to the executive director.

One of the reasons I like an hourglass as a visual statement of the board/staff relationship is that an hourglass does not have a top or a bottom. Thus the hourglass does not represent a power issue; its focus is a relationship issue.

As a board commissioner, one should never overlook the importance of maintaining a very positive board/staff relationship. The board commissioners and the executive director, and in some districts, the senior staff members, make up the Park District Leadership Team. They are the leadership team for the staff, the volunteers, and the district members. The effect of that team on the entire park district is significant. The leadership team of the park district sets the mood for the entire park district and the effect of that mood on the district can be enormous. This statement is based on years of personal research as a board trainer, but also is based on research found in the book *Primal Leadership – Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee.

The authors emphasize the importance of the mood of the leaders of an organization. They explain that the reason the leadership's moods are important in an organization is because of the design of our brain. We have several systems within our body and most of them are closed-loop systems. For example, our circulatory system is closed-looped and is self-regulated. If I have high cholesterol and I sit next to you, you do not have to worry about getting high cholesterol from me because the circulatory system is self-regulated. But our emotional centers have an open-loop nature and thus depend on outside sources to manage it. That is why when we are in a group, the mood spreads like wildfire. That also explains why when you hear someone laugh hysterically you smile or join in on the laugh, even when you don't know what they were laughing about. Both good and bad moods perpetuate themselves.

The authors share some research regarding leadership teams that I believe every park district leadership team should be aware of. An overall explanation of the effect of moods can be found in the following statement: "Moods, the Yale study found, influence how effectively people work; upbeat moods boost cooperation, fairness, and business performance" (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, p. 10).

The authors also point out that the mood of the leadership team has a serious effect on the organization: "The study found that the more positive the overall moods of people in the top management team, the more cooperatively they worked together – and the better the company's business results. Put differently, the longer a company was run by a management team that did not get along, the poorer that company's market return" (Goleman et. al, p. 15).

The effect of the mood of the leadership team has an effect on how much people enjoy working at or coming to the park district facilities and functions, but it also has a huge effect on the business performance of the park district: "our analyses suggest that, overall, the climate – how

people feel about working at a company – can account for 20 to 30 percent of business performance. Getting the best out of people pays off in hard results. . . . In short, leaders’ emotional states and actions do affect how the people they lead will feel and therefore perform” (Goleman et. al, pp. 17-18).

According to the research cited by the authors, it is extremely clear that the leadership team of the park district can no longer fight amongst themselves and overtly micromanage and criticize each other and still expect the staff, volunteers, and district members to believe that they have a great park district!

The impact of a high level understanding of the role of the Board of Commissioners and a strong working relationship between the board and the staff is colossal. Each staff member and board commissioner needs to continually ask themselves, what am I doing to contribute to the effectiveness of our park district?

#### Works Cited

Goleman, Daniel; Boyatzis, Richard; and McKee, Annie. (2002). *Primal Leadership Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

#### Bio info:

Nancy Sylvester, MA, PRP, CPP-T resides in Loves Park, Illinois. She is a Professor Emeritus of Communications at Rock Valley College in Rockford. She has been a professional parliamentarian since 1980 and a board trainer since the early 1990’s. She is the author of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Robert’s Rules* and *The Guerrilla Guide to Robert’s Rules*, both published by Alpha Books, a division of Penguin Books. She has been a frequent speaker for the IAPD. She invites you to her website, [www.nancysylvester.com](http://www.nancysylvester.com), where there are numerous free articles on parliamentary procedure and boardsmanship.