

# Nonprofit Strategies



## SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

### *Communicate; offer structure for effective board of directors*

#### **By Barry VanderKelen**

One of the biggest challenges any nonprofit organization faces is attracting and retaining talented people to serve on its board of directors.

Nonprofit leaders need to ask two questions to begin to identify solutions to this problem. First, what is the communication flow between the organization and the board? Second, how is the work of the board structured? Interestingly, the answers are interrelated.

#### **Communication flow**

According to BoardSource ([www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org)), an organization that seeks to improve nonprofit boards of directors, the average number of hours a board member spends working on behalf of the organization is 15.9 hours per month. Contrast this number to the average 250 hours worked per month by nonprofit executives. If you worked four hours a week, would you feel like you knew what was going on? Is there enough information flowing from the organization to the board members so that they can engage the issues and be effective? Sending too little information in between board meetings is as bad as sending too much. In the first case, directors won't feel confident representing the organization to the community. In the second case, important in-

formation won't stand out from all the other news and notes.

Knowing what information to send is more of an art than a science. Annual board self-assessments will help identify information needs of the directors. Also, ask the board president for thoughts on what should be sent.

Lastly, encourage individual directors to ask questions about the organization. All of these things will help improve the communication flow to the board.

#### **Structure of board work**

Sometimes, the work of nonprofit boards is structured in a way that discourages directors from utilizing their talents and abilities. Take, for example, the work of a board that has an executive committee.

The purpose of an executive committee is to organize, monitor and assess the progress of activities of the organization. Executive committees set board meeting agendas, re-view priorities of the organization to guide staff, evaluate the executive director, and recruit and train new board members.

Often the executive committee is authorized to act on behalf of the full board in between board meetings. The work of the organization

is aided by an executive committee, especially if the full board meets only every other month.

Unfortunately, too many executive committees take on too much of the work of the full board. This small group screens the other committees' activities and decides which items are placed on the board meeting agenda. Important business is transacted without the full involvement of the board and reported to the other directors. What's left for everyone else is fundraising, so it seems.

The directors who are not on the executive committee have all of the responsibility without all of the authority. What I am suggesting is that the manner in which an executive committee operates may contribute to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining board members. Effectively communicating with directors and creating a structure that utilizes their talents will help make your nonprofit board attractive to more potential members.

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#### **Resource Use**

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

#### **Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune**

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

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