



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Passion is key element in Nonprofit World

By Barry VanderKelen

Andy Robinson, a consultant who helps strengthen small nonprofit groups, gives his keynote address tonight at the 2008 Collaboration Forum, an annual gathering of the county's nonprofits.

Robinson, a Vermont resident who works with clients throughout the United States and Canada, will speak on "The Next Generation: Leading by Giving Away Your Power."

The forum, which gives nonprofit groups an opportunity to share best practices and learn new skills, begins at 6 p. m. in the Chumash Auditorium at the Cal Poly Student Union. It continues all day Friday with a series of speakers and workshops.

For more information, visit

www.collaborationslo.org. Two weeks ago, I spoke to Robinson about the importance of collaboration.

I recently spoke to him again by telephone about nonprofit boards:

Q: In much of your writing you say that board members need to be passionate about their work. Is passion the key element to a successful board?

A: Certainly, when you're talking about fundraising. Whatever you're trying—be it personal visits or phone calls — especially for volunteers, passion is essential. The average tenure of a development officer at a specific nonprofit is 18 to 24 months. Skill sets move with the staff member. But passion about (an organization's) mission does not.

Q: Is the goal to build a "great" board or a "strong" board? What's the difference?

A: It's not a matter of great versus strong. The reality is that most boards don't achieve their potential. The main reason is the members don't expect much from each other. Board members need to work together as a team to set expectations, develop tools to be successful, and to determine how their work will be evaluated. This will help board members be successful and accountable. One of the most important tools for boards is mentorship—board members need to train and support one another.

Q: How does a board achieve the right level of oversight of the work of the organization?

A: This is a difficult thing for or-

ganizations, especially small ones. Clear job descriptions for staff and board members, especially for officers and committees of the board, are crucial. The best job descriptions are reciprocal — they state what is expected as well as what tools and training are available to be successful at whatever is being asked of the person. This becomes a recruiting tool: "We will help you be successful." Another thing I have found to be helpful is each board member spending one day per year shadowing a staff member as a way to see what the work of the organization really is.

Boards can learn from their experiences. They can pick an example of when the roles were confused and use it as a case study. Talking about it in the abstract or hypothetical is not helpful. Because there's not one set of rules that apply to all organizations, boards need to learn what works best for themselves.

In addition to tonight's presentation, Robinson will be the first speaker of tomorrow's session with, "What do You Want to be When You Grow Up? Creating a Sustainable, Successful Organization." The day will continue with numerous other workshops and roundtable discussions.

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-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at