

1

“Ears In, Fingers Out”

Dwight Gunter

Best Practice: Board members understand the role, purpose, and function of the board.

It was the getting-to-know-you stage of the pastor-church board relationship, and it was the April board meeting, my first at Trevecca Community Church in Nashville, as my tenure as pastor had just begun April 1. In this first official meeting I recognized this stage of the leader-governance board relationship to be crucial. I was sure they had questions for me, and I knew I had some for them.

Of the many issues we would eventually address, there was one imperative for us: we had to be on the same page regarding *purpose*. What was the purpose of the church board from the perspective of the board? Did their perspective mesh with mine? Did they agree with each other regarding the purpose of the board? Were we operating from the same playbook? Did we share the same expectations?

The answers to these questions are vital to the relationship between pastor and church board. In fact, the same truth applies to the leader of any organization and the governance board of that organization. If leader and board are not in agreement on the fundamental issue of purpose, conflicts will arise.

When the leader and board have different understandings on the purpose of the board, several dangers emerge. First, the board may focus on the *wrong target*. The board should concentrate on mission, vision, values, and policy. It should be looking forward, outward, externally, giving attention to the mission of the organization, thus empowering the accomplishment of the mission. To state the obvious, if the board focuses on the wrong target, the right target is missed. The result is the “well intentioned in full pursuit of the irrelevant” (Carver, *Boards That Make a Difference*, p. 19).

Second, if the board and leader are not in like mind regarding the purpose of the board, they run the risk of *differing expectations*. Unmet expectations form the soil from which frustration and anger spring up. Too many relationships between leaders and governance boards end in conflict due to this very issue—unmet expectations. Most often the cause of unmet expectations is simply a failure to clarify them. Note that even when clarifying expectations there is the danger of not living up to them, but that is another issue. A leader and a board cannot live up to expectations that have not been clarified—or if they do, it is simply a haphazard occurrence.

Third, *power struggles* often result. Who is going to make the decisions regarding administrative issues, such as hiring administrative assistants or terminating ineffective personnel? Who is responsible for the day-to-day operation of the organization? Financial issues such as paying the bills, producing finance reports, or monitoring budgets often become power struggles. These power struggles can arise in a variety of areas, depending on the size and scope of the organization—hiring faculty, setting operational goals, approving vacation requests, setting office hours, managing paid and volunteer staff, determining equipment priorities. You name it, and it is a potential power struggle.

Power struggles tend to center on the issue of control. When control becomes the goal, a true biblical understanding of roles within the organization is lost. People then take ownership in the church or organization in a self-centered way, acting as if it belongs to them

instead of Jesus Christ. When the leader and board operate from the same playbook regarding the purpose of the board, power struggles are avoided, and the full leadership team operates as a body, with each member fulfilling his or her role with clear, well-defined expectations.

In order to avoid the dangers above and to help the board be as effective as possible, it is good to routinely remind each other of the purpose for the board's existence and the roles of both the leader and the board. I do this at the beginning of every new fiscal year.

Why is a governance board necessary? What is the purpose of the governance board? Most organizations have an organizational manual of sorts, whether a constitution, bylaws, or charter. Usually the purpose and duties of the governance board are delineated there. However, on a macro level there are excellent reasons for the existence of the governance board.

First, the board's foremost task is to *clarify mission*. If the mission of the organization has not been clearly articulated, then it is the responsibility of the board and leader to clarify that mission. This may take the form of writing a completely new mission statement, or it may involve a simple edit of an existing statement. Whatever the case, clarifying the mission is the top priority of a board.

Second, once the mission has been clarified, it becomes incumbent upon the board to *hold the organization accountable to that mission*. This is where many organizations falter. After spending hours and months developing and articulating a mission statement, the board and leaders often check it off the to-do list, cast it to the side, and lose it in the pile of projects considered to be the next best thing. Many times the next best thing has nothing to do with the stated mission.

Once the mission is clarified the most important task of the leader and of the governance board is to hold each other and the organization accountable to that mission. Every task the organization does, every decision it makes, and every resource it utilizes must be done with the sole purpose of accomplishing the mission. That is what it means to be missional.

Third, *values* are to be determined by the governance board. What do we value? What should we value? The answers to these questions are not always the same. Yet reality must align with intentionality. It is the role of the governance board to both define the values and hold the organization accountable to the values. For example, imagine one of the values of a local church to be grace. You can't argue with that. Imagine a social outcast visiting the church and desiring to unite with that congregation. Imagine someone saying to the pastor, “What is that person doing here? We don't want those people in our church.” Does the value of grace shape the response to the misguided parishioner? Will the board take a stand for the values it has identified and committed to? It is the role of the pastor and board to hold the church accountable to the values, even if the implementation of those values is not always convenient.

Fourth, the board needs to be the arena in which *vision* is heard, shaped, synergized, and empowered. People often think of seeing a vision. That would make sense. But in reality, a vision is heard. As the leaders listen to the voice of God around them, they will begin to hear—and then see—the vision. God will speak the vision through people, circumstances, and the Word. The leadership must develop ears to hear the vision of God as He speaks it into the world. No wonder Jesus was constantly saying, “If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear” (Mark 4:23).

As discussion occurs regarding the vision being heard; then the vision begins to take shape. There is a synergy that develops as various components of the vision begin to emerge. Think of an orchestra with various instruments joining the music and the beauty that emanates from such a synergistic force. Direction can be established and the score written to accomplish the vision God is playing in the world. The board must then empower the vision to be accomplished. This involves finance, personnel, and so on.

Fifth, it is the role of the board to *determine policy*. The board becomes the clearinghouse for all policy of the organization. Policies become the tracks on which the organizational train runs. The poli-

cies are the parameters in which the organization functions. It is the duty of the board to determine these policies and implement them.

Sixth, the board has a *fiduciary* responsibility as well. The word "fiduciary" comes from the Latin *fiducia*, meaning *trust*, "a person . . . who has the power and obligation to act for another . . . under circumstances which require total trust, good faith and honesty" (<<http://dictionary.law.com>>). Board responsibilities include financial oversight. This requires integrity and faithfulness in all matters. Conflicts of interest must be avoided. The interests of the organization supersede personal interests.

Seventh, the board is also to determine the *general structure* of the organization. Even though there may be pre-existing parameters for the organizational structure, there is often flexibility in many specifics. The board is to set the structure in place and to do so with the mission in mind. Ideally a structure would be developed that would empower the accomplishment of the mission of the organization.

Eighth, the board should *give permission* for missional ministry to happen. Think of *per-mission*. Giving permission is allowing people to minister according to the mission of the organization. If the board tries to control every ministry in detail, it will fall into the traps mentioned earlier in this chapter. However, if the board gives permission for ministry to occur, positive outcomes most often result.

The board can take several actions that will help facilitate a permission-giving organization.

1. The board should communicate the expectation that the ministry is to be effective. In other words, the board is not just giving permission but is hoping, praying, and expecting the ministry to be effective in the mission.
2. The board should provide clear budgetary and ethical guidelines for the ministry. These are most often articulated in the policy manual.
3. The board should leave the details of those ministries to the responsible teams within the organization. Let the team charged

with the task of leading the specific ministry direct the details in agreement with the policy.

4. The board can communicate a climate in which it is safe to fail. Without the safety to fail, risks will not be taken. The thinking might be “Give it a try. If we fail, we’ll do something else.” The results will most often exceed expectations.

Ninth, the board needs to *lead rather than react*. Too much valuable meeting time is spent reacting to various problems rather than leading toward valuable potential. It is necessary at times to respond to problems, but the task of the board is to lead to a preferred future more so than to react to past problems. Leaders lead. If the leadership leads to the past, is the organization then walking in circles? The board and the pastor are charged with the task of leading the organization into God’s vision of the future. *Lead rather than react*.

As my first meeting with the board unfolded, we discovered we were on the same page and operating with the same perspective. The relationship developed. Mission was clarified, and we held each other accountable to that mission. Values were articulated, and we began to live them out. Vision—God’s vision—for the church emerged. Specific ministries were developed, people were empowered to serve, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Ears In, Fingers Out: Application

Local Church

To state the obvious, pastors are busy people. Because the pastor’s job is never completed, the challenge is to find ways for the pastor to stay focused on the mission.

A pastor working alone cannot keep the church focused on the mission. The leadership must share that responsibility.

The process I have used for helping the leadership of a church work through the issues presented in this chapter is simple but very intentional.

Step One: Articulate and internalize the mission of the church. The purposes of the church board have been presented in this chapter. It is imperative that the mission of the church be clearly articulated and honestly internalized if the purposes are to be accomplished. Chapter 2 delves into the mission in greater detail. Once the mission has been addressed, the board is then in a position to gain better perspective on its purposes.

Step Two: Clarify values. Think of this step as a project—an exercise—that can help the board grow in its understanding of Christlikeness. It is really a simple process of identifying things that matter, such as grace, character, stewardship, compassion, holiness, evangelism, and so on. Ask the board: How does God desire people to describe the church?

Step Three: Assign a team to create a policy and procedure manual. Don’t make the mistake of trying to reinvent the wheel. Many churches already have policy and procedure manuals, and most will be willing to share how those manuals were developed. However, resist the temptation simply to copy what another church did—even with the church’s permission. Each local church should tailor-make its own. The policy and procedure manuals of other churches can give guidance on the issues that need to be addressed and even how they addressed them, but each local church needs its own.

Once the mission, values, and policies are in place, the stage is set for the board to do what the board should do. Again, concepts are presented in this chapter that should prove useful in the ongoing work of the church board.

Not-for-Profit Organization

Most not-for-profit organizations are borne out of a heartfelt desire, passion, or specific leading of the Holy Spirit of one person, or a small group of persons, to meet a specific need. The passion and personality of the leader alone may drive the organization for an extended time, perhaps even years. However, without a functioning board, the organization’s growth is limited to the capacity of the founder. When the founder is no longer available, the ministry falters, and many times once-powerful ministries close their doors.

So for new and emerging not-for-profit organizations:

Step One: The leader or leaders must understand the value of a strong, functioning board of directors and decide to establish such a board. For organizations that already have a board, step one will provide ongoing board development, based on the nine responsibilities noted by Dwight in this chapter.

Step Two: Assemble an effective board. It is important to invite only persons who share the passion for the mission and whose competencies add to those of the leaders. Passion for the mission is far more important than narrow technical expertise, because the board’s decisions will determine the future of the organization, and mission must drive those decisions. Persons with technical capabilities, such as insurance, legal, and accounting, who may not share the passion can be retained by the board for guidance in those areas on an as-needed basis.

Step Three: Fully understand the role and responsibilities of a governing board and its importance to the organization. The guidance of this book, especially the wisdom of this chapter’s nine responsibilities of a board, provides a sound basis for forming or strength-

ening a not-for-profit board. It is also wise to seek input from board members of larger or more experienced not-for-profit organizations.

Step Four: Write a crystal-clear mission statement. The most fundamental and crucial responsibility for all not-for-profit boards, especially those of new and emerging organizations, is to establish clearly the organization’s mission and commit it to writing in clear, precise language.

Step Five: Explore and put in writing the board’s response to each of the remaining eight responsibilities noted in this chapter. These are major issues, so it is important to allow ample calendar and meeting time to consider each one thoroughly.

Higher Education

Max De Pree in his book *Called to Serve: Creating and Nurturing the Effective Volunteer Board* quotes Walter Wright, former president of Regents College: “A board holds the future and mission in trust” (p. 24). In other words, the boards of Christian colleges, universities, and seminaries are responsible for determining the philosophy, the values, and the policies of the institution consistent with the mission, vision, and strategy of the school. It is not the board’s responsibility to develop a strategic plan for the organization; rather, it is its mandate to insure that such a plan exists. De Pree believes that “while the administration’s leadership team should be thinking through the strategic planning, the board should review and question and bring its perspective to the scrutiny of such plans (p. 25).

His chapter “The Marks of an Effective Board” recently caught my attention again. He focuses on “effective boards” because he feels that “the chief responsibility of boards is to be effective on behalf of the organization” (p. 8). He hits hard at a poorly constructed board agenda and calls this list of events or subjects to be discussed “an exercise in random trivia” (p. 8). He believes that “if the board regularly composes a well-thought-out agenda, there will always be a north star.”

De Pree’s marks of an effective board, as outlined in one of the early letters to his friend, are as follows:

1. An effective board has a mission statement.
2. An effective board nurtures strong personal relationships.
3. An effective board stays in touch with its world (whatever its world is).
4. An effective board does very good planning.
5. An effective board gives itself competent and inspirational leadership.
6. An effective board works seriously at the growth, needs, and potential of its members.
7. An effective board provides to the institution wisdom, wealth, work, and witness.
8. An effective board is intimate with its responsibilities.
9. An effective board decides what it will measure and does it.
10. An effective board plans time for reflection.
11. An effective board says "thanks." (Used with permission.)

Although De Pree discussed the design of the board structure and the role of the chairperson, I was particularly interested in the four categories of things the board owes the school leader: mandate, trust, space, and care (p. 81ff). He feels that the board mandate to the leader should include a mission statement and a strategy, "both of which derive clearly from who we intend to be" (p. 82). Included in the leader's mandate are "the statement of expectation and a definition of what will be measured in his or her performance institutionally, professionally, and personally" (p. 82).

De Pree feels the board owes the leader of the organization "space" to become the school president or organization leader. He discussed the need for a "workable structure," setting agreed-upon priorities, "as well as working to involve the entire organization in understanding and adopting those priorities" (p. 86). The board should take a strong interest in the personal growth of the school or organization leader. By "care" for the leader, De Pree means that the board should express care for the needs of the leader's family for friendship, support, and love; "the kind of care that goes the extra mile . . . including the need for continuing education and develop-

ment—especially the opportunity to be mentored—and the kind of care . . . that doesn't permit the person to work himself or herself to death" (pp. 87-88).

Which of the "marks" identified needs the most attention in your organization? What can you do about it during the next meeting?