

GETTING THE BEST OUT OF ASSOCIATION BOARDS

Hotsheets

BY MARK JAMISON, career association CEO and President of envericom Ltd.

Let me start by directing you to John Carver's Boards That Make a Difference (or any book written by John Carver). If you haven't read any Carver, [do that straightaway](http://policygovernance.com) (policygovernance.com) and then return to this hotsheet. I will wait.

Good. You're back. What you now know is what so many association leaders don't: you need a governing policy. Chances are you don't have one. You really need one. While we can't write you one now, here are some tools and ideas to help bridge the gap.

Many who become staff or volunteer leaders (Executive Directors) in not-for-profit organizations often come from the "cause" the association represents. They might be editors, ballet dancers or plumbers lacking the association management skills. Association management skills are real skill sets that one needs. They can be learned. Sitting on a board does not qualify you to report to one.

So, during breaks from reading Carver, managing the organization, and partying like you're 19, here are some sample readings from a toolkit chapter in my 3000 page book which will be brilliant if I ever finish it.

BY-LAWS ARE NOT GOVERNING POLICY

The purpose of by-laws (well, there just has to be a sport analogy...) is to:

- Tell you what GAME you are playing
- Tell you how many PLAYERS you need and the way they are picked
- Tell you when to change players, start a new game, and what some of the penalties are

A basic operational **governing policy structure** is based on these four action points:

- Boards decide
- Committees advise
- Staff implements
- Everyone helps

Takeaway: By-laws are WHAT we play and the governing policy is HOW we play.

Therefore:

- When you are a **director** you wear your **TOP HAT** and you: **Consult and decide.**
- When you are a **committee member** you wear your **HARD HAT** and you: **Review and recommend.**
- When you are staff you **serve, recommend, do, enable, put out the garbage and turn off the lights each day when you close the office.**

THE BOARD

- EDs and Board Chairs do not manage Boards. Your role is to provide an environment that gets the best out of busy, talented, and interested people. The ED bridges the proverbial gap between members and Boards.
- Don't think about "changing" a Board structure...evolve it continuously.
- Keep director terms short (two years) and have a maximum number of terms allowed (three terms).
- Very large boards are a bad idea. They become spectators not players. Customize size to value.
- Have a continuously functioning nominations committee that draws on the community (see committees).
- ALWAYS have an in camera session—that is one without you, the staff leader, at every board meeting.
- Be an ED who can be a bridge, not a dam (see notes for the ED, below).

MINUTES OF BOARD MEETINGS

- They are essential and they are legally required records of decisions made BUT...
- They need only contain basic discussion points and motions, when it happened, and attendance.
- If brevity leads to clarity, they should NOT be:
 - court reporter transcripts
 - written in that annoying dime store legalese that embarrasses real lawyers.



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COMMITTEES IN GENERAL

- They are consultative—full stop.
- Are there to increase trust and transparency (building community), and ensure that the majority of committee members are NOT, repeat NOT, board members.
- Use committees to prepare prospective board members.
- Someone should take meeting notes, noting recommendations and why, but board type minutes are unnecessary and often confuse committee members into thinking they have made a policy decision.
- Committee recommendations should flow through the ED (see notes to the ED) to the board for review when necessary.
- Avoid committee chairs reporting at board meetings. Why? It adds time, fuels ego and accomplishes little.

PLANNING: NOT JUST A CONCEPT

Make a plan and follow it. The periodic review of the current business plan implementation process is necessary, but it is not the opportunity to re-open the original decision. Often a “crisis” erupts in the current cycle because at every meeting participants want to keep “tinkering” with the current plan until it crashes. The development of the next business plan (on a parallel track) allows for sober second thought of how current policy and process can help make a better plan for the next cycle.

Implement policy with a plan and reporting process. A plan and reporting process will be a succinct document with the structure of implementation (Why, What, Who, When, Where and How) clearly defined and regularly reported to the Board and committees. This reporting process is there to show the Board that the plan is in motion.

An idea is a goal without a plan. Any idea is formless and mostly useless without a plan of execution. Without a plan there is no structure. Without structure, your time would be better spent nailing rain to a wall.

Make a plan and follow it. (Read that point again.)

Energize your Agenda (abridged)

Define a time to start and a time to end.

Every meeting needs to start on time and end on time.

Deal with OPERATIONS separately from STRATEGY.

Reviewing operational activity is not the same as focusing on future needs.

Focus on decisions, not just discussion.

Always meet to decide or don't meet.

Prioritize agenda items based on the need to take action.

A meeting agenda should focus the participants on items needing the most attention.

Less is more.

A long unfocussed agenda wears everybody out and opens the door to bad decisions.

NOTES FOR PROSPECTIVE DIRECTORS AND COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- It's not about you (or even your money, where applicable).
- You don't own the association, the community does—remember that (many don't).
- If you cannot park your personal agenda and your ego at the door—don't join.

NOTES FOR THE ED

- It's not about you either, nor do you own the association. (It's also not about your money, but as an ED you probably don't have any.)
- You are the bridge to all specialties, not the specialist.
- You are a Sherpa guide. (Search for and read Robert Greenleaf on servant leadership.)
- You are the hub of the wheel that is running you over.
- You need a sense of humour (see point above).

GETTING ALL THE WAY TO THE RESULT

This is strategic planning shorthand.

1. Review the environment
 - a. Identify priorities
 - b. Assess commitments (\$)
2. Reengineer the structures
 - a. Develop governing tools
 - b. Address skills/process gaps and needs
 - c. Identify partnership opportunities (\$)



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3. Implement
 - a. Manage
 - b. Guide/monitor
 - c. Guide to result

You might need help doing this but don't break the bank on consultants with templates that smell more like snake oil than success. The process does not need to be long, painful, and discouraging for volunteers.

Finally, if things go sideways, read more Carver.

If all else fails get in touch with me through envericom.ca where I will be writing my book and partying like I am 19.



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