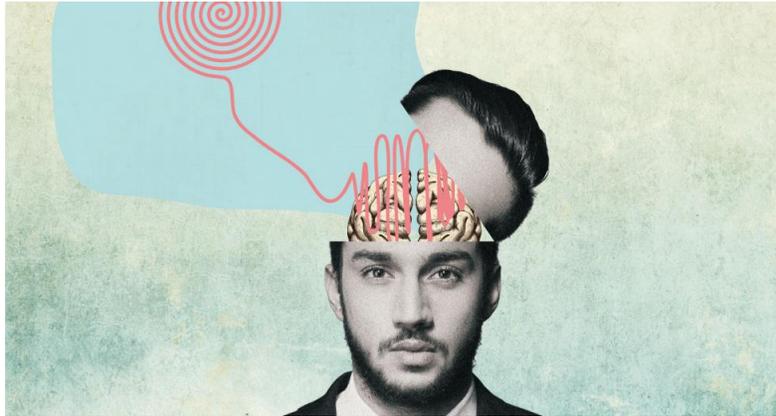


# COMSTOCK'S

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## Let's Get Functional

### 3 tips for better board performance

*By Kim Tucker*

Our region's nonprofits save lives everyday. Many of them do so despite answering to dysfunctional boards. From all-volunteer, grassroots organizations to multi-million-dollar, statewide agencies, we've heard the stories of boards that lack leadership, management, strategy and vision.

Most board members join an organization for the right reasons, but many fail to make a meaningful impact. Meanwhile, executive directors complain their board lacks engagement and makes unreasonable demands. Obviously, a disconnect exists, but this scenario has a solution and can be fixed. Here's how:

First, recognize that highly functioning boards share these attributes:

- An engaged board chair — someone not over-committed, who is available, responsive and supportive of the executive director
- A culture of accountability among board members
- Board term limits that are followed and celebrated
- Objectives that are accomplished between board meetings

- Structured meetings with the advance distribution of consent calendar and meeting materials

Exceptional board management requires strong leadership. The board chair should pay attention to and make great use of individual board members' talents and interests. A strong board chair should also establish a culture of accountability with personalized job descriptions that leverage members' spheres of influence. Board leaders should inform members that the expectation is an individual contribution averaging six hours of monthly service outside of board meeting time.

Successful board meetings are dynamic exchanges wherein everyone engages, and discussions are about the strategic and long-term. Does that sound like your last meeting? If not and you're a board chair, consider how your style might contribute to a lack of engagement. Are you too focused on consensus? Do you steamroll through the agenda, not allowing time for meaningful discussion? Do you let that one annoying board member dominate the discussion? If so, accept responsibility, and take corrective action.

You are responsible for the culture of the board, and you can change it to one of accountability, respect and impact. Transforming a board into an exceptional one, or at least improving its performance, is an exercise the board chair shares with the executive director. Together, consider these upgrades.

**Recruit strategically.** Give up pursuing for your board the nine players in your area who run big corporations, and focus instead on a diverse group that aligns with your mission. Recruit new board members who are passionate about the organization and have a firm grasp on whom or what it serves and how it goes about achieving its mission.

**Train your new folks well.** Once you identify a new board member and they willingly accept, remember that it's not the qualified who are called, it's the called who get qualified. Provide great mission-centric exposure and information, and make sure the board has an orientation protocol that offers periodic training on a variety of subjects. The protocol will get your new members up and running and will establish a pipeline for new board members.

Training for new board members should include an introduction to a strong committee structure where newbies can visualize a good fit for their skills. Start by combining all internal, external and governance-related functions into three committees, with every member assigned to just one committee. Getting work done at the committee level and between meetings allows time for big-picture discussions at the board meetings.

Whether a board member is new or has been around a while, institute an individual board development plan for each person. Toss out the old job description that gently suggests 75 percent attendance at meetings, and instead convey higher expectations. Create a fill-in-the-blank template that generates ideas of how each individual can make a difference for the organization. You'll be amazed how ho-hum can morph to wow when board members are empowered with information and direction.

**Commit to individualized attention.** Part of the job of board chair is to conduct meaningful, strategic planning and board evaluations annually. Meet one-on-one with each member of your board at least once a year. The outcomes will be valuable when considering whom to groom as a potential leader.

If you are an executive director, get to know these board members. Conduct your own one-on-one interviews, especially with new board members, and do it well within the first 90 days of their term. It will be very helpful to you to know how each board member can support the mission, i.e. support you. A great board will have your back if relationships are formed early, expectations are clear and courtesy and respect are mutual.

If you serve on a nonprofit board and feel out of the loop or think you don't matter, think again. Consider the above-mentioned upgrades — and speak up!

Don't forget, you are on a board because you bring skills to the table. Your nonprofit's impact depends on the engagement of all board members. If strategic, mission-centric board pursuits aren't happening, take it upon yourself to lead change.

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