

Because They Care: Staying Grounded as a Volunteer Board Member

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It is 7:15 p.m. on a rainy, dreary winter evening. You are exhausted, and you just got home after a long day of attending to your day job. When you were able, you responded to emails regarding board business and questions of you from members throughout the day. As dinner is warming, you stare out the living room window awaiting a call from a member who said they needed to speak with you and indicated it was urgent. For volunteers appointed or elected as board members, this scenario may happen with some regularity. Deep inside our head a little voice says, "I wish the membership would just trust us — I mean after all, they elected me." You finish your call with the member after you fully listen to their concerns. You look at the clock on your phone and realize the call was 45 minutes long. Another late dinner. You sit down to eat and find yourself reflecting on the call you just had. You wonder exactly what to do with the member's concern. On one side, the concern is clearly an important concern for this one member and likely worth some dialogue with organization leadership. On the other hand, the concern does not seem to be a concern the majority of members would share. Nonetheless, as a board member, you have an obligation to be available to the membership and, at the minimum, provide space to listen to member concerns. As you reflect on your conversation, you find yourself thinking the concern would likely address itself if the member knew more about the board's conversation surrounding that issue.

Such exchanges and moments of reflection can be unsettling and tiring for board members. However, these moments can also be affirming and empowering. In order to stay grounded as a board member, we must remember one important point — the member(s) would not reach out to us if they did not care. It has been my experience that concerned members do not reach out to a board member just to complain. In each instance, I can think of when a member contacted me as a board member, two patterns were often present: the member obviously cares deeply about the organization and the member cares enough about the specific concern to take the initiative to reach out. Board members can remain grounded by seeing these moments as opportunities and not intrusions. Taking the time to listen and engage in dialogue can be both affirming and empowering to both the board member and the concerned member. Other than taking time to listen to member concerns, two themes have helped me, as a board member, remain grounded: understanding perception and trust.

First, perception is what happens when we do not really know what happened. We fill in the gaps with what we think may have happened from our perspective. When a member is not privy to the boardroom discussion, it is only natural for the member to fill what they do not know with what they think must be true. Because the board member is privy to discussion in the boardroom,

the board member knows the perception of the issue is not always accurate nor does it always reflect the discussion in the boardroom or the intent of the board. However, when in conversation with a member about an issue and perception is clearly at hand, we must not get defensive and we must be skilled at recognizing we are operating in an arena of perception. In most instances, the best answer to address issues concerning inaccurate perception is more information. However, information discussed in the boardroom is sacred to the boardroom and is not information for the general membership, right?

Sort of. General information can help to redirect misperceptions without sacrificing the sanctity of the boardroom or without divulging specific details of the board discussion. For instance, a member calls and wants to hear details about the board's discussion on a bylaw revision related to changing the composition of the board. Instead of discussing the details of the board dialogue, share a couple general points about why there is a need to consider a change. Sharing general information allows the board member to begin to gain buy-in before the proposed change becomes official and without compromising the board dialogue. A part of a board member's duty is to protect the organization from potential harm. Not providing some information to invested members can and does cause harm within organizations.

Second, trust is one of the most important elements in a relationship between a board of directors and the membership. In "The Will to Govern Well: Knowledge, Trust & Nimbleness" (2010), trust is characterized by the author(s) as being "about reliability, focus, and constancy" (pg. 107). We operate in and around institutions that value transparency. A C.S. Lewis quote comes to mind: "integrity is doing the right thing when no is watching." This concept can be explained in organizational governance terms as the board keeps promises made to the organization and acts in good faith for the betterment of the organization at all times. If such a focus is in place and communication to the membership reflects this focus, trust in the board will be and remain high.

The life of a non-profit board member is a hectic one. Be sure to have the support of your supervisor from your place of employment and limit any other volunteer service to allow you to focus on your board role. Board service takes time and energy. To lead in a volunteer board role means to believe that members approach you with their concerns because they care deeply about the organization. Recognizing good faith in others and acting with good faith as a board member are two of the best ways to remain grounded during your term of service. So, next time a concerned member reaches out to you and says it is urgent, remind yourself that 1) you care or you would not be serving, 2) they care or they would not be calling, and 3) each call is an opportunity to inform and engage the membership. The ability of a board member to stay

grounded, successfully navigate perception, and earn member trust are a few ways to remain energized and committed to the organization you serve.

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References

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