What Does the Board Really Need to know?

Many board members think that they need to know or be informed about everything that goes on in the organization of which they are a board member. Unfortunately some Executive Directors or Managers believe they should satisfy this need and generate so much information that board members are overwhelmed. Then there are the Executive Directors/Managers who think that the best way to control the board is to keep them so busy with information that they will have little time left over to meddle in the affairs of staff.

Neither of these is helpful and both contribute very little to help a board become more effective or productive.

My suggestion is that a board's need for information be guided by the "Nice to know – Need to Know" principle.

"The only information that a board **needs to have** is information necessary or relevant to carrying out its role and job functions. All other information is nice to know, but is not required".

One way to think about this is to divide information into three categories.

Need to Know (specific to the board's role and agenda): This is information the board members must have to make decisions. It is information that is, will or could affect or shape the underlying assumptions and premises, which contribute to their decision making on matters brought before the board. For example, information to help it choose from among alternative options regarding treatment of the organizations customers/clients; or to help it decide on a position to take regarding proposed legislation that will have serious consequences for its membership. It is also information that includes trends, challenges, threats or opportunities that could impact how they will guide and direct the organization.

Monitoring (Need to Know): The information in this category is used to determine whether existing board directions and operating parameters have been satisfied. It is evidence based, offering proof of accomplishment or compliance (it assesses performance).

Nice to Know: When a person first becomes a member of a board there is a legal requirement that they know about the nature of the work done or services provided by the organization, how it is managed and administered, and who it serves. At this point in their life as a board member it is "Need to Know" information.

However, once they are knowledgeable about the work of the organization, information about the organization's programs, services, and staff activities may be nice for board members to know about, but it is not essential to their work or role as Directors. This type of information helps to keep them connected to what is generally happening in the organization, but does not serve the purposes of monitoring or decision making. In this type we include information about programs, services, changes in staffing, conferences attended, new program or service initiatives, etc.

This information should be made available to board members in such a way as to ensure that it is identified as incidental and does not become a 'back door' method for attempting to meddle in operations or monitor organizational performance.

It is the board's responsibility to identify the information it needs or wants to enable it to conduct its business rather than to simply sit back and have staff attempt to guess or mind read the boards expectations.

The board may not always know what information it requires, in which case it is appropriate to ask staff to identify what the board should or might want to know. An essential factor in board effectiveness is being able to identify what it needs to know.

TIPS

The board information package can now be divided into three sections, one that contains information specific to items on the agenda; one that has more general information about programs, activities and events; and one that contains information about emerging issues, trends and new developments.

Or, it could mean that information sharing about activities, events, changes in staffing, and program news does not take place in board meetings. Instead, a special information sharing session is convened an hour or two before or after the board meeting for the express purpose of keeping board members abreast of what is happening in the organization.

It could also mean that much of the general information about the organization's programs and activities is posted on the organization's web site and is updated on a weekly basis. This means less paper flowing out to board members and a reduction in paper costs.

Perhaps the most important point to be made about these suggestions is that what they are designed to do is to help boards use meeting time more effectively. The less time spent in a board meeting dealing with non-essential information, the more time available for dealing with significant and critical issues.