

3 New Year's Resolutions for Not-for-Profit Boards

By Beth Deazeley

Yes, I know. It's a busy time of year and you've already made a bunch of New Year's resolutions. Besides, the fact that you sit on the board of a not-for-profit organization (perhaps the result of a prior New Year's resolution) should be enough, right?

If you've made the commitment to help steward a non-profit, you may as well do it right. In the spirit of the season, here are a few simple resolutions which can increase your effectiveness as a director, and help your board add real value to the organization.

1. Do your prep

This involves an effort both from the ED or other staff who prepare board materials, as well as board members. Set a firm deadline by which materials must be sent out prior to board meetings. A week is a good length of time. Staff are busy and "boardwork" can easily get pushed to the bottom of a long to-do list. Emphasize how important board materials are and make your expectations clear regarding when you expect to receive them.

Once you receive the materials, review them thoroughly. You can then get rid of wasted meeting time at the start of each agenda item while board members flip through a stack of paper trying to find materials, then sit in silence reviewing them (clearly for the first time) before discussion starts. Highlight important points in the materials, scribble down the margins, cover them with sticky notes. Actively engage with them – don't just skim them over. Use the skill sets you were recruited for. Who knows, you might free up enough time at meetings to move beyond routine agenda items to more dynamic board activities such as generative governance and strategic planning.

2. Visit the front lines

An astonishing number of NPO board members diligently attend monthly meetings, the AGM and an annual strategic planning session, but have never seen their organization in action. Whether it involves visiting a daycare, taking a turn with the ladle at a soup kitchen, or simply arranging to drop by the office during business hours, a site visit will allow you to put faces to the names of staff members and volunteers and give you a practical perspective on operational issues. It's also guaranteed to beat the January blahs and fire up your sense of commitment.

3. Bone up

Pick one area of board responsibility with which you are less familiar and do one thing to get more comfortable with it. Think about things like better understanding the organization's legal obligations, improving your knowledge of the sector and stakeholder groups, or (if you're like me) grappling with the financial statements. Don't rely on the fact that there's someone on the board who's an expert. All directors share responsibility for board decisions. Borrow a book, take an online tutorial, or go to a live course. You don't have to become a subject matter expert, but by investing a few hours, you'll increase not only your comfort level but your ability to contribute.

Follow these resolutions for a few months and see the difference they can make to your experience as a director and to the functioning of the board as a whole. You may find you keep these resolutions up long after some of your other ones (like getting to the gym three times a week) fall by the wayside.

All the best for 2010!