

Mentoring Your Way to Board Development

by Lols J. Zachary

We are living in a new era, an era that is chock-full of new paradigms, new models of leadership and new ways of accomplishing work. It is abundantly clear that this new era requires a new kind of board work as well.

Board development, the vehicle of choice for facilitating engagement and education of boards and their board members, is an organic, evolving, and proactive process solidly rooted in learning. Learning informs the strategic processes necessary to enhance board functioning, increases the capacity of board members to serve and to lead, and raises the level of a board's production capability.

Mentoring is one of the most powerful means for facilitating board development and learning. Increasingly, non-profit boards are following the lead of their private sector cousins and utilizing mentoring as a means for orienting new board members, hastening individual and organizational learning, and transmitting organizational culture.

Orienting New Board Members

A non-profit board of busy, competent, committed volunteers find themselves facing tough decisions in a rapidly changing health care environment. Because of the financial impact of the decisions that needed to be made quickly, they turn to mentoring to help shorten the learning curve and maximize precious human and financial resources. Recognizing the already extended responsibilities of the board, they assign a staff member (outside of the board member's area of expertise and experience) to broaden and educate each new board member over the course of a year. From the very first experience, board members know they are an integral part of a learning organization.

Hastening Individual and Organizational Learning

A non-profit arts board uses a group mentoring process to continuously educate its board members. Board members receive a board agenda for the entire year and then target areas in which they have expertise and areas in which they may need mentoring to get up to speed on issues. Peer mentoring makes this a powerful learning experience and helps build teams within the board. Board members continuously learn from each other and feel better and more satisfied because they make more informed decisions.


Transmitting Organizational Culture

Mentoring is part and parcel of succession planning in a community-based organization. In this model, the board chair, CEO, and management team work together with the emerging board leader, a year ahead of time, to prepare for the role of board chair. The board chair, CEO, and management team independently compile lists of skills, abilities, and competencies

that they project will be needed to lead the organization over the next 3-5 years. The emerging board chair self assesses his or her strengths and weaknesses relative to each item on the list. The management team then assigns an appropriate staff or board mentor to facilitate the process and fill the necessary knowledge gaps.

The Ripple Effects of Mentoring

Mentoring, in today's non-profit world, is serious business. Its benefits have a ripple effect far beyond one individual mentee's learning experience. Mentoring provides a growth experience for the mentor. Mentors find they learn new things about their mentee, about themselves, and about their organizations. Mentoring enables organizations to align values, mission, and purpose of the organization.

Ultimately, the most successful board mentoring programs become a seamless part of the board's learning culture. They are natural, supported, and valued. With the right vision and plan, your organization can be on its way to an exciting, enriching, and educationally sound mentoring program. 

Important Questions

Board mentoring programs enjoy sustainability over time when mentoring is embedded in an organizational culture that values continuous learning. To build, grow, and support a viable mentoring culture, you will need to consider the answers to the following questions:

- ♦ What learning objectives will a mentoring program support?
Don't start a mentoring program just because it is trendy. There must be solid "business" reasons to support it or it won't last.
- ♦ What organizational support already exists and what needs to be developed?
Successful mentoring initiatives require visible support, involvement, and commitment from the highest levels of the board and staff.
- ♦ What are our criteria for success?
Without concrete learning objectives, you may just be spinning your wheels. Establish long-term goals that you can measure and celebrate.
- ♦ Who needs to be involved in developing a board mentoring program?
The board development committee, in consultation with board members and staff, should be collaboratively involved in developing, implementing and evaluating the program.
- ♦ How will we pair mentors and mentees?
The answer to this question depends on the goals of your program and the specific learning objectives. Consider involving staff and board members as mentors. It may be that in order to meet the learning needs of some board members, you will want to look outside the rank and file of your organization.