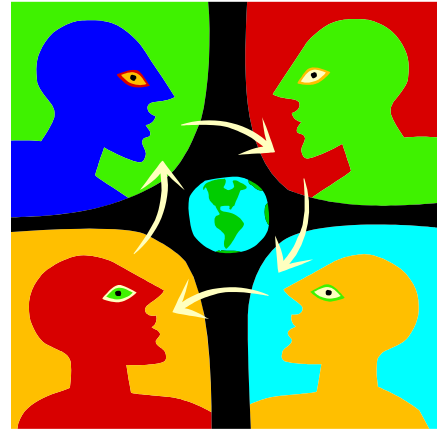


How Boards Can Have Better Conversations



Board development in the voluntary sector generally focuses on organizational mission, strategic planning, roles and responsibilities (especially those delineating board from staff), setting policies, recruitment and meeting practices. As important as these matters are, greater attention needs to be paid to the relational aspects of governance - how board members interact and get along. Better conversations can help make the experience of working on a volunteer board more enriching and energizing.

It may not be enough to simply remind ourselves to “cut fellow board members some slack” and hope that they will do the same for us. What is really involved in having better board conversations?

Human communication is a complex and challenging process at the best of times. We each have our own filters which selectively process the messages that are sent to us and there is a gap between our intentions and the words we use to convey ideas to others. Moreover, our emotions play havoc in our efforts to understand and be understood. The more important the matter, the harder it is to find the words to express ourselves or to really hear what is in others people’s hearts.

The board, as a team, is not strengthening when we sit back and leave all the communications management to the chair. Better interpersonal communication can help us to experience differences amongst board members positively and therefore promotes better decisions.

If we believe that each of us can be the change we want to see in others, then good communication starts with ourselves - a new policy is not needed. Each of us has the power to make a difference in improving board communication. We can all:

- Listen more to understand than to respond. Being really attentive to others means not allowing our mind to go to work passing judgment or crafting a reply or counter argument before we have really “heard” the message.
- Speak from our own direct experience, be aware of our assumptions and “own” our feelings.
- Balance the time we spend talking telling and asking questions. While as a board member we have an obligation to share our opinions and judgments, we also need to inquire into others’ perspectives. The more heated or charged the conversation, the more work we need to do trying to understand how others see things.

- Extend a personal invitation to another board member to add to the conversation. *“Debra, I would value hearing what you think about this matter.”*
- Expose our own thinking process and inviting others to reveal theirs. *“This is what I believe we should do. I came to this conclusion as a result of.... I am also operating with a couple of assumptions which are...”* and *“Robert, you have a lot of experience with these kinds of things, could you tell me more about how you understand this issue?”*
- Speak to what we do not know and what we are unsure of, as well as what we are confident about. “Thinking out loud” can be a useful way of introducing a new idea or subject to be inquired into by the board.
- Be genuinely curious about ideas and people around the board table. Being open to new information requires us to suspend judgment, not rush to see others’ contributions as competing with, or canceling out, our own input. Even seemingly contradictory statements can reveal important perspectives if we work at exploring them further.
- Show real appreciation to other board members. Even when we do not share another person’s view we need to look harder at finding merit in their ideas. At the very least we can acknowledge the fact that they have shown up, are engaged and interested. *“Marc, thanks for putting that idea forward.”*
- Avoid assuming that we really understand other board members’ intentions or motivations from what they said. or, for that matter, that we have clearly revealed our own “good” intentions.
- Take more opportunities to speak from our heart and acknowledge the importance of this when others reveal what they most care about. *“I know we have different ideas about what we should do but for me there is a fundamental issue here and it is about....”* and *“Allan, I sense you really care about this issue.”*

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Chris Argyris describes the progressive process of observing, gathering information, making assumptions, and deciding as being similar to climbing up on a "**ladder of inference.**" Every person has a tendency to climb up the ladder of inference too fast. Almost instantaneously after seeing or hearing someone else speak or act, we integrate the new observation/information with our existing set of assumptions, sometimes prompting action that has only minimal relationship to what was originally spoken or observed. When this same ladder-climbing dynamic happens within a social or organizational setting, an environment for conflict is created that easily escalates. Argyris' ladder of inference is well described on a number of web sites. Argyris, C. (1990) *Overcoming Organizational Defenses. Facilitating Organizational Learning*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon

Also see: Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen (1999) *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, New York: Penguin Books.