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BOARD LEADERSHIP: Who's in the Driver's Seat?

By Peter V. McGinn

Introduction

Leadership is about action, not titles. Titles are useful for labeling positions in a hierarchy. They may also indicate formal management authority and responsibility. However, they do not necessarily indicate who actually gets things done or who exercises the most influence over others.



Nevertheless, people often invest a lot of meaning in titles. By virtue of their titles, some board members, for example, may view themselves as different or special relative to other board members, while some may view themselves as lesser participants. This may lead a few to take on more power or authority than is warranted, while others may defer to them more than they should.

In any effective work group, including a board, members need to stay alert to their participation and contribution levels. Members who dominate discussions diminish the potential contributions of others. Members who draw back from full participation diminish themselves and deprive the board of potential value.

The board needs to tap into the full talent pool represented by its members. No one should just be along for the ride. If the board has done a good job of selection, then each member will have unique value to offer the board. Each member should be prepared to step forward and lead his or her colleagues as required by the situation at hand.

Look inside for a reprint of an article authored by Peter McGinn and published in *Trustee* magazine directly related to this important issue.

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BOARD LEADERSHIP: Who's in the Driver's Seat?

By Peter McGinn

Who is the leader of your board? Is it the chair? The CEO? Someone else—perhaps a former chair, the member with the longest tenure, or the one with the greatest community influence? Or it could be the person with the loudest voice, who is also the most opinionated. Alternatively, it might be a quiet person who commands attention because of his or her insightful comments.

Does your board have one leader or many? Is one person at the wheel with everyone else along for the ride?

I like to use the picture of the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima in World War II as my mental image of leadership in action. A colonel had ordered that a flag be flown. Sergeant Michael Strank, who had earlier been offered a promotion but turned it down to stay with his men, put together a team of five others in addition to himself. Several scoured the ground and found a large pipe, while another secured the largest flag available. They attached the flag to the improvised pole and raised it together. Strank died in battle less than two weeks later but left behind a lasting image of leadership.

Leadership is about action, not titles. A board member who advocates action is more of a leader than a board chair, board officer or CEO who is complacent or who habitually defers action. Great leaders, such as Robert Heyssel, M.D., the former CEO of the Johns Hopkins Health System, Baltimore, make an impact because of how they translate their vision into action and how they help others in their organizations do likewise.

Unfortunately, some health care professionals have a tendency to instill doubt and hesitation among board members by implying that health care is unique and too complex for a layperson to understand, which often limits trustees' willingness to act. Of course, it is true that many of the rules, regulations and reimbursement formulas in health care are counterintuitive for those accustomed to conventional businesses and professions. Therefore, it is not unusual for board members, who are leaders in other arenas, to defer to executives or physicians, who have more

familiarity with the jargon, methods and oddities of health care practice and management. It is a mistake to insist, however, that health care is so specialized that an intelligent board member with common sense cannot help guide the organization to make better decisions and contribute to strategic planning or values and mission clarification.

Over the years, many board members with whom I have worked have demonstrated effective leadership, some when they had a leadership title, such as board or committee chair, and others when they carried no title.

For example, a past board chair always asked perceptive questions. When I, as CEO, would listen carefully to the question's implications, I would see new opportunities for action.

I have worked with other board members who have given me timely advice. For instance, in 1997, I was confident that we had anticipated and evaluated the challenges of Y2K correctly for our information systems. One of our board members, who was CEO of a large and respected firm, described a Y2K assessment he had made in his own organization. He challenged my assumptions and caused me to look at the problem in a new way. He was right, and this led our organization to rethink our methods for protecting our information system while there was still sufficient time.

Another board member, an accountant, researched the background of an organization with which we contemplated doing business. Using publicly available records, he compared their financial results with benchmarks, raised insightful questions, and helped us achieve a fuller picture of our prospective business partner.

I have seen other board members play devil's advocate. They question assumptions and conclusions to test management's logic and thoroughness. They lead by helping us avoid "groupthink." Some board members become champions for critical programs. They lead by reinforcing the board's or management's resolve when enthusiasm or commitment might otherwise wane. Some long-term board members play the role of historians, reminding the rest of us when we are seeing an old issue in a new disguise.

And finally, there are the new board members (and those who are willing to take a new perspective), who don't let us get away with a flawed rationale for actions simply because "we have always done it that way."

On a bus, only the driver has control and can determine how the bus will move. Many people act as if their boards or organizations are similarly designed—that is, only the person in the driver's seat can make decisions and act on them. But effective organizations and their boards are different. You can drive from any seat.

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Conclusion

In theory, groups perform better than individuals in handling challenging tasks and complex issues. That is because groups can bring more knowledge and skills, broader perspectives, and keener judgment to bear on the problems at hand.

In practice, however, groups do not always perform better. This is particularly true when group dynamics such as “groupthink,” excessive deference to authority, “silo” thinking, hidden agendas, fear, or over-confidence predominate.

There are two old sayings that summarize the potential contrariness of group performance when a group does not use its member assets well.

First: ***“A committee is a cul-de-sac down which ideas are lured and quietly strangled.”***

Second: ***“The IQ of a group is equal to the IQ of the lowest member, divided by the total number of people in the group.”***

You can avoid having your board suffer this fate by considering how to maximize the contributions of each member. Each board member has the opportunity to make uniquely personal and valuable contributions to the performance of the board and the whole organization.

ARE YOU HELPING MAXIMIZE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR BOARD?

1. What knowledge or experiences do you have that could provide new insight or richer understanding for management and other members of the board?
2. Are your board and management inclined to “shoot from the hip” without sufficient analysis and data or are they more likely to avoid risk and defer action whenever possible? How can you help create a better balance?
3. Do you know—or have you made it a point to learn—the special interests, knowledge, or experiences of others on your board so that you can prompt and encourage them to participate more fully?
4. Can you provide some examples of the particular constructive role you play on your board, including better decisions made and actions taken because of your involvement?
5. Can you recall some board discussions, decisions, or actions about which you had unvoiced concerns or reservations? Could you have improved the process or outcome by speaking up?

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