

A
Kettering
Foundation
Report

Beyond Constituencies:

NONPROFIT BOARDS AND THE PUBLIC

The Kettering Foundation

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Beyond Constituencies:

Nonprofit Boards and the Public

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What I would change if I could would be much broader than my organization. I would change the values that people seem to have — the drive to make as much money as possible, to work around the clock. There is no time for family or the outside world. People are limited to talk radio, or at best CNN, for their knowledge of the world. There is a need for more awareness of the importance of being givers and not just takers.

— Board member of an international NGO

Introduction

In 1997, the Kettering Foundation commissioned The Harwood Group to write a major study on the relationship between boards of directors and the public.¹ The study was based on interviews with 75 board presidents from across the United States, distributed evenly among public school boards, local pass-through organizations such as the United Way, and community foundations and civic organizations.

A major finding of the original study was that board members' responses to challenges of their public credibility might actually worsen their situation. Despite the growing desire to work within their communities, and to tap into what at least some board members understand to be the richness of civic life, boards face increased competition for resources, as well as pressures from both donors and an apparently unengaged public to prove that they are having an impact.

While few would question the need for boards to demonstrate their fiduciary responsibility and the positive impact of their organizations, the response to such pressures in these 75 organizations appeared to be a board mind-set that defined communities as fragmented constituencies, that seemed fixated on funding, and was unlikely to question increasing professionalization.

The Harwood research raises two basic questions:

1. Does this board mind-set vary among nonprofit industries?
Although the Harwood study did not uncover differences among the four types of organizations surveyed, recent research on New Haven, Connecticut, (Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999) supports the idea that general mind-sets in nonprofits are more closely related to the same industry in business and government sectors than to nonprofits in other industries.²
2. Are nonprofit organizations that do not define their primary mission as civic more able, paradoxically, to develop deeper understanding of their communities and ties to the public than civic specialists such as pass-throughs, community foundations, and civic organizations?

In response to these questions we undertook an informal ethnographic study to either reinforce the Harwood findings or to point to a particular industry or industries deserving of more extensive research. Our study was designed to relate directly to the theme of a conference on "The Nonprofit Sector: For What? For Whom?" convened by the International Society for Third Sector Research in Dublin, Ireland, in June 2000 by focusing on both public accountability and the relationship of boards to the larger public beyond constituencies.³ Four of the fifteen organizations interviewed were

¹ Harwood, Butz, Fitzgerald and Richardson. 1997. For a shorter version see Harwood, 1998.

² The published version of the article on New Haven, by Peter Dobkin Hall, can be found within the edited volume, about to be published.

³ The original version of this paper was presented to the Fourth Annual Meeting of the International Society for Third Sector Research, held in Dublin, Ireland, in June 2000. The theme of the conference was "The Nonprofit Sector: For What? For Whom?"

international NGOs located in two cities, with ramifications for their work both in that community and in other countries as well.

Prior to beginning our interviews, we surveyed the literature on nonprofit boards to see if it supported the Harwood findings. Most of what we read focuses on mission, board/staff relationships, board motivations, and board politics and processes, rather than the relationship of boards to the public (Carver, 1997; Harris, 1993; Heifitz, 1994; Milofsky and Morrison, 1996; Widmer, 1989; Binder, 1999; Lane, 1994-1995; Bowen, 1994).

Studies that deal with the subject of boards and publics often follow Jones' (1985) distinction between Burke's best interest of the public and Rousseau's representational role. Baughman (1987), for example, focuses on board members lack of awareness of their role as guardians of the public good as well as their elite character. Among others who have written about the representational role through discussions of stakeholders or the impact of diversity or elitism are Houle, 1989; Davids, 1993; Bowen, 1994; Middleton, 1987; and Heifitz, 1994. Although a third possible alternative role that would tie boards to the larger public is less in evidence, one stakeholder discussion considers the community ties and networks of board members, (Whitt and Moore, 1996) with important implications for this study.

Perhaps more directly relevant to this study is the literature on board accountability, which tends to focus on conflicting accountabilities among donors, constituencies, and institutional mission, with a particular focus on financial accountability (Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates, 1999; Fink, 1989; Kruger and Gauss, 1994; Clotfelter and Ehrlich, 1999; Herzlinger, 1996). Wood (1996), more explicit in relation to public accountability, observes that board members rarely think of themselves as performing a civic act and as accountable to the public interest.

A third group of scholars has begun to deal with the deeper meaning of public accountability, if only tangentially. Smith (1995), for example, views trusteeship as an expression of democracy against professional dominance and an important guarantor of pluralism in a democratic society. Milofsky and Morrison (1996) describe the reliance of board on staff because they are assumed to know the community, even though they (the board) should be closer. Although he writes about governmental, rather than nonprofit, boards, Mitchell (1997) gets beyond constituencies in his observation that democratic responsiveness depends not just on increasing board diversity, but also on the ability of citizens to shape the board's priorities.

After surveying the literature, we drafted interview questions to be used for open-ended informal discussions with 27 board members from 15 organizations. This allowed us to follow up on unexpected insights. The interviews began with basic informational questions about the organization, its purpose, budget, etc. The more substantive questions that followed were based on the questions below, posed at the end of the Harwood study:

- 1) How far can professionalization take us in terms of accountability and credibility?
- 2) What are the implications of pursuing constituencies? Does this increase community fragmentation?
- 3) What does it mean to have a deeper understanding of a community, and who can speak with authority to provide such understanding? Can this understanding be provided merely by having better procedures, smarter board members, and stronger staff?
- 4) In terms of accountability, what is valuable and to whom? How might the community measure a program's value?
- 5) How do board members truly see and act within a community? What would it mean to reexamine mind-sets and alter institutional practices?
- 6) To whom do boards see themselves as accountable? To the public?
- 7) How could deeper understanding of the community be balanced with independent professional judgments?
- 8) What, if any, alternative activities are boards initiating to immerse themselves further in their communities and deepen their understanding of their communities?

Once the interview questions were prepared, we used them to interview 2, and in some cases 1, board member from 15 organizations in 3 very different industries within the Third Sector — 7 human service organizations focusing on families and youth, 4 arts organizations, and 4 international NGOs (nongovernmental organizations).⁴ Interview texts were then transcribed and analyzed using content analysis.

Because this is an ethnographic study, the organizations were selected from among those that demonstrate some interest in developing community ties to strengthen their primary mission.⁵ The youth and family organizations are located in a city, and the arts organizations are located in another city and a small town, all in one midwestern state. Two of the international development organizations are located in a midwestern city, and two are in a western city.

The organizations selected were all more than three-years-old (Wood, 1996), and board members interviewed had at least two-year's experience on the board. The four arts organization interviews included two board presidents, and five out of the seven youth and family organizations included interviews with board presidents. However, with the international NGOs we limited ourselves to board members living in the locality, and this meant we were only able to include one board president and one president-elect.⁶

⁴ Because of scheduling difficulties, we interviewed 11 board members from 7 rather than 4 human service organizations. We were able to interview two board members from four of these and one each from three.

⁵ The international NGOs, for example, are part of a project sponsored by Interaction, the umbrella organization for international NGOs in the United States, designed to better connect their member organizations with the local American communities where they are located.

⁶ The two international NGOs in the West had only 2-3 board members from the local community. However, we were able to interview the incoming president of one international NGO in the midwestern city where he lives.

The Organizations

The annual budgets of the 15 organizations ranged from \$37,000 to \$20 million. The organizations were founded between 10- and 131-years ago. The smallest organization, a local symphony and chorus, has no paid staff, while the two largest organizations employ hundreds of people. One of these is a child care organization, and the other is an international organization that employs many people overseas. In addition to the small town symphony, a second arts organization is a graphic arts school and exhibit center in a small city with major economic problems. The third arts organization describes itself as an “Off-Broadway theater,” and the fourth promotes arts clubs in public schools and stages a yearly musical produced by children. The four international NGOs focus on savings and microcredit, refugee camps, preventive health care services, and an alternative technology for the developing world. The youth and family organizations focus mainly on children, including those who are at risk, and on women in recovery from drug dependence.

When asked about the most significant challenge faced by their organizations, only one in three respondents named something other than the need for raising more funds. The two board members of the local symphony listed “audience building” as their major challenge. Music, according to one, is “not a priority for most people. Sometimes we feel frustration and despair, but also a gutsy stubbornness.” Similarly, board members from the organization that promotes arts clubs in schools talked about the need to remain viable and meet the diverse needs of students under an increasing focus on proficiency tests. Two board members from an international NGO and a youth and family organization told us their major concern was that the staff was so good that someone else would hire them. A fifth respondent mentioned, “Our major concern is that we are small, in a field dominated by the large players.”

Perhaps the most interesting comment about challenges came from a board member of an international NGO. “What I would change would be much broader than my organization. I would change the values that people seem to have — the drive to make as much money as possible, to work around the clock. There is no time for family or the outside world. People are limited to talk radio, or at best CNN, for their knowledge of the world. There is a need for more awareness of the importance of being givers and not just takers.”

Two-thirds of the board members viewed fund-raising as their principal problem:

- “Because of the arts classes for low-income kids, money is a priority.”
- “Funding for general operating expenses is hard to find. The board spends a lot of time trying to raise money. Our courses

don't contribute much."

- "Lots of organizations are bidding for the same dollar. New creative programs get shot down because the funds are not there. We are always trying to make ends meet."

The Boards

Despite diversity in size and budget, the boards all have between 6 and 36 members. Several boards emphasize gender, racial, and age diversity as goals of board composition. Judging from the actual composition of the boards, the goal has yet to be fully achieved. The youth and family boards that use a strategic approach in identifying and selecting members appear satisfied that they are making progress. As the chair of a youth crisis program stated, "[Selecting board members is] part of our strategic plan. We want to represent the community at large with all types of diversity."

The board members of two of the arts organizations and three of the international NGOs described board composition as insufficiently diverse in terms of minority membership, although several people described what one called "strong self-conscious efforts to change this." However, one of these international NGO boards is multiethnic in that it includes recent immigrants to the area. And one of its members described its board as "diverse in terms of life-style."

Perhaps the only common denominator in all these organizations was that prospective members tend to be nominated by current board members. Even those who described a formal or strategic nominating process said that they counted on other board members or board committees to suggest potential new members. Respondents often used phrases like "through word of mouth" and "we get lots of input from board members." The only exception was a crisis center for women where the "corporate member" was given the responsibility to recruit new board members.

Several organizations use a formal or "strategic" process of selecting new members. One international NGO asks all prospective board members to go through a formal interview process with the board and staff and looks for "people who can open doors." Two of the arts organizations and several of the child and family organizations have definite selection criteria to attract board members with certain "skill sets." One board member of an organization that deals with youth in crisis talked about using "a grid where we look at specific skills, such as strong financial skills ... the program runs like a business." Another said, "We target leaders, people who have influence in the community." By drawing on different professional skill sets, board members say they are improving their ability to make decisions.

There are also criteria other than skill level used for selection. An arts organization tries to get representation from communities surrounding the city where it is located. Youth and child care

organizations include parents or youth representatives. One organization has a power-sharing relationship with parents whose children are in the program. The board is responsible for governance but a parent policy committee approves all hiring and other policies of the organization.

Almost all of the organizations we interviewed had three-year board terms, and many boards use a process to identify and appoint new members to the board. Two boards that serve youth said they use committees as a kind of training ground. They invite a prospect to serve on a committee and, over time, if the person proves to be an active interested committee member, they are invited to join the board.

There were, however, a few organizations that complained of having an informal or weak process for selecting new members. One respondent said, "There is not a set process. . . . I just call (on board members) for names or suggestions." Removing board members may also be informal, and some people we interviewed complained about this. As one board member observed, "There is no automatic or required cycling of board members. . . . I think of the organization as a time warp. Several board members are not involved at all, but it is hard to get them off." Another said, "I've been on the board for 20 years. One criticism of our board is that it is a self-perpetuating board, and after so many years, people get burned out."

One international NGO, however, uses former board members, who don't want to leave, as active volunteers on board committees. Or, as another international NGO board member explained, "We tried in the past to be more strategic. But my experience is that people who are passionate about the mission are the best."

Although several other board members stressed the importance of having a passion or commitment, passion alone may not be enough. They say that both passion and expertise are qualities that make for good board members. Finding people with the right combination of both appears to be something that human service organizations, especially, struggle to find.

Personal Characteristics of Board Members Interviewed

With only two exceptions, the board members we interviewed were active in other organizations, and most were members of at least one other nonprofit board. One board member said, "(They say) if you ask busy people..." Another even told us that the thing he likes about his board colleagues is that they are "what the Carter Center calls 'boundary people,' who are not limited to the confines of one organization." One exception was a retired man who spends a great deal of time volunteering for an international NGO and is not a member of any other boards, but does attend Rotary to publicize the work of the NGO. The other exception was a man who said he spends 20 hours a week working with the organization whose board he chairs.

He is the third generation of his family to serve on the board.

When we asked how this board differed from others to which they belonged, the board members revealed a wide range of personal motivations for joining the boards. Several board members from the arts organizations told us that their membership was tied to “fun.” A board member of the symphony and chorus told us, “I just love to sing. I have always believed that if you want to participate, and you get something, then you must give back.” Both board members from the arts organization that sponsors school clubs described their participation in terms of their love or passion for the work.

Board members from some of the international NGOs and the child and family support organizations talked about strong beliefs in their mission and a long-term commitment. Others from both fields placed more emphasis on the way the board is run:

- “This is different from my other boards in that I am increasingly able to have an influence on management, etc. Since I am from the business sector, things that are subconscious for me are useful here. On other boards, people don’t even show up. That is what attracted me here. This is more businesslike than other boards I am on.”
- A member of the Off-Broadway theater board observed that it “challenges board members more than other boards via its attempts to obtain ideas and opinions.”

Some board members said that service on the board was an extension of their professional interest. “I try to focus on an educational venue. I teach in early childhood, my research is in early childhood, and in my work I have a pre-K through 12 focus. Yet it all fits.”

Board Processes

In describing the role of the board, how the board makes decisions, how differences of opinion are handled and how that had changed over the years, almost all of the respondents focused on “talking through an issue” as the typical decision-making process.⁷ As a board member of an organization that focuses on women in crisis described it, “We talk and talk until we iron out issues.” A board member of an international NGO observed that, “We don’t stop talking, [even] after getting everyone to speak.” When issues are too thorny, according to several board members, they are often deferred to another meeting.

Comments about how board processes have evolved from being dominated by one or two key people imply that this was not always the case:

- A past board member of an international NGO had his own foundation and tended to dominate meetings, according to one board member.
- The president of an arts board described how a former member

⁷ The two board members of the Off-Broadway theater were the exception. They talked about how decision making was centered in the staff or executive committee of the board.

had held meetings at his home and “dominated” meetings. “We were slow to understand what was going on. Now no one dominates, but I can’t get anyone to replace me as president.” His fellow board member concurred with the observation that today laughter and candor characterize their board members.

- “There is much less of a few people dominating. That is not tolerated. Our general culture has changed. The good old boys themselves are more sensitive and focus on what gets the job done.”
- One board member of an international NGO described the atmosphere of board meetings as “much more collegial than in the past,” although her colleague, while generally supportive of the change, observed that the downside of a “talking out” process was more chaos than when a few people dominated.

Despite these changes, board members tend to listen to professionals on boards who have a certain expertise. As one observed, “I think we listen to people who have more knowledge. When the issue is a financial one, people tend to defer to me. I defer to [board member], who is a lawyer, on legal matters and to a person with a background in human resources on matters of staff.” Another said, “The board is comprised of professional people who deal with high-level decision making. Board members feel good about asking tough questions. The financial people look at costs, others may look at the public policy perspective. I look at issues from a public relations perspective.”

Several board members said their board’s decision making has evolved, or has gone through cycles. Most were trying to move away from being involved in operational functions to governance, a process they described as focusing on ends rather than means. “Our role is governance, but it hasn’t always been that way. We are in a transition of letting go of operational functions,” said a board member from a youth organization. Crisis within the organization most often prompted a board to assume or reassume an operational role. A board member of a youth organization said, “Over the last several years, it has been an operational board. We were almost managing on a day-to-day basis.”

The other side of the coin is that strong staff leadership appears to make board decision making easier. According to one board member, “When [the director] speaks, everyone listens.” Another member of the same board said, “Staff presentations are very well prepared and thoughtful.” Another respondent described her board’s relationship with staff “as good as it gets.” Still another said, “We work closely with the executive director and the ED works with staff. We have access, but the flow of information is better.” A member of a board of an organization that had a troubled past said, “Having a new director means that the situation has improved.” A member of a different board in a similar situation said, “We are moving to a

governance structure. We have an excellent director. Our job as a board is to make sure that the agency exists 20 or 30 years from now, and that it meets its obligations to all of the constituencies.”

In contrasting the decision making on the board of a small youth and family agency with that of a large arts organization (that we did not interview), one person noted that the two are “vastly different,” neither is perfect, and she longs for a happy medium between the two approaches. Leadership of the arts organization (the director) is “independent, with a great professional staff, but we don’t coalesce because we are basically a financial resource.” The arts board would like to be more strategic. In contrast, the director of the youth and family organization is “empathetic but lacks business sense.” Its board is, therefore, “struggling to redefine itself and to be less involved in staff functions.”

Almost without exception, respondents emphasized that a better-functioning board process also depends on a strong committee structure, and a few board members expressed concern about the weakness of their committee structure. Those who spoke positively about their committee structures tended to attribute this to strong board-staff relationships. As one respondent explained, “Many people are not creative without a structure. The muscle for creativity has to be developed . . . the seeding and feeding of the board and staff are constant and encouraged.”

On the other hand, several board members pointed out that once committees acted, there was little disagreement or discussion at the board level. This lack of discussion led a board member of a youth organization to describe how “the board acts as a rubber stamp. I don’t want people on the board to vote for my way of thinking just because I said it.”

One organization operates under more stringent constraints on decision making. Heavily funded by government, its policy manual is “four-inches thick,” and the board knows its role precisely. As one board member explained, “There are two basic responsibilities — corporate and individual. We set policy, serve in an advisory capacity, hire the CEO, oversee financial soundness, and serve on committees. Our job is oversight.” Individual responsibility consists of “attendance, participation on committees, and advocacy as a public spokesperson.” But a unique power-sharing arrangement with parents may also offer opportunities to connect with the community. The other board member described a parallel policy council comprised of parents whose children are in the educational program. As she explained, “Everything goes to the policy council.”

Board Training

The board members we interviewed tended to fall into four categories with respect to board training.

- 1) Those who had some kind of board training, usually strategic

planning, in the past, but did not think it had made much difference. Several of the international NGO respondents and the board members of the local symphony did not think it improved things much, although one did acknowledge that it made board members more aware of the need for “high quality” in their role. These less than enthusiastic descriptions may have been due to the quality of the training. As the board president of the local symphony and chorus observed, “He donated his services, and he probably should have. He didn’t know how to deal with audience development.”

- 2) A second group was enthusiastic about their experience with strategic planning and felt it had improved their relationships with staff, committee structure, and board processes. Four of the family and youth organizations and two of the international NGOs had undergone long-term strategic planning and were generally enthusiastic about the differences it had made in board relationships with staff, committee structure, etc. The family and youth organizations view strategic planning as a rallying point. One person stated that the board ran out of steam, and he felt that the process helped to reenergize and focus the board on the long-term goals for the organization. Another said, “It opened our eyes to problems and needs and helped us to determine how to accomplish the goals we have.”

Enthusiasts of strategic planning often use retreat settings as the kick-off or culmination of the planning process. Several board members felt that retreats provided opportunities for self-assessment and for the development of common goals. It is not clear, however, how broad the participation in goal setting and retreats actually is, especially when the board is very large or when the activity is centered among staff and a few “representative” board members. As one respondent explained, “Ten or eleven people served on the committee, the rest were asked to fill out questionnaires. When we had the retreat, only a few people were able to attend.”

The international NGOs had tended to use “internal experts” on their staffs as strategic-planning consultants, because most outsiders “don’t understand the nature of our work.” One board member also mentioned using other resources such as “how-to” publications for nonprofit boards.

- 3) Other board members had undergone training with the Carver method (Carver, 1997), and were enthusiastic about it. The executive director of an arts organization, for example, provides board members with options, each of which is framed in terms of pros and cons. Discussion focuses mainly on ends and means. One of his board members described the result as “more participatory dialogue about how we are serving the community rather than micromanaging.” He observed that some members, such as

aggressive business people, have had trouble understanding such questions as, “Who are the moral owners of our center?” He added that the Carver method allows board members to step out of their board roles when they talk informally to the executive director. In fact, when board members bring up an issue not within the ends-and-means discussion, they are encouraged to talk informally to staff, rather than take it into the board meeting. A member of another board that had used the Carver method said, “We are together . . . now we have a common focus, and everyone plays a different, yet important, role. It’s nice and there is a lot of respect.”

The difficulties with this process could emerge, however, within organizations with few or no staff members. One board president remembered that, “At one point the new board members felt that they were decision makers and not workers. I was doing posters, articles, programs, and the other guys were making decisions.” Similarly, the president of the board of another small organization, which is running a deficit, expressed frustration with always having to examine the budget. She said, “Boards [according to Carver] should not review budgets, but should put caveats on spending.” She added that, “Carver says that you should evaluate after every meeting to determine if you did board work — such as thinking about mission — or staff work.”

- 4) Those who went through orientation training at the beginning of their term felt that it was very helpful. However, only a few respondents mentioned this approach to training. One organization does the orientation in a group, rather than one-to-one and noted that older board members often learn something new. A member of another board said that an orientation for new board members is held every year. Board members of one international NGO consider orientation trips to international projects essential for new board members, who pay for these themselves.

Constituencies

Although only three of the organizations we interviewed were membership organizations, most of them consider their individual, particularly their local contributors, as “members.” When asked to name their local constituencies, board members usually listed small as well as large donors. One international NGO receives 60 percent of its budget from small donors. Yet while acknowledging the importance of their large donors, board members of some of the other international NGOs worried about being funding driven.

Almost all respondents named the people served in the wider community or in international projects as a major constituency. Among these constituencies were the children in inner-city schools who have access to arts education, refugees in camps overseas, women in crisis, or the unemployed.

Among the wide range of other constituent categories listed by board members were:

- “the artists themselves”
- senior citizens
- youth
- parents
- students
- schools
- local arts groups
- women in recovery
- our volunteers
- local refugees
- first-generation Americans
- academics
- some business people
- the medical community
- local university students
- people in their jobs
- people who take our courses on international health
- sports broadcasters
- theatergoers
- local government

A board member from one membership organization in the study redefined the idea of constituency by saying that they “promote partnerships among adults and girls.” Rather than using the term constituency, another respondent explained that they have “stakeholders,” which included employees, families, and funders.

What was perhaps most surprising is that none of our respondents talked about racial, religious, ethnic, or geographical constituencies as the Harwood study presidents had done.⁸ There were no references to division or fragmentation among different constituencies. A few board members spoke about “the public at large” as a constituency.

Accountability

Responses to the question about accountability tended to mirror the answer to the question about constituencies, except that there was generally more emphasis on accountability “to the community.” One youth and family organization board member observed that her organization’s role is a “civic responsibility.” Another board member of a different youth organization said, “If we aren’t doing a good job, we lose participation, and we lose funding.” This sense of responsibility to the larger community was also expressed by the two board mem-

⁸ Telephone discussion with Neil Richardson, The Harwood Institute, June 28, 2000.

bers of the organization whose efforts to improve arts education had been less than welcomed by the school system.

At times, this reference to the larger community was qualified. For example, a symphony board member talked about “those in the community who appreciate the music, and the musical communities in [nearby cities] who are watching our development with surprise and delight.” And sometimes the concept of community was expanded far beyond the local community. “Our accountability is to the 2.5 billion people in the world using traditional fuels.”

When asked how they manage when there are competing interests from constituencies, most respondents said there aren’t any competing interests. An arts organization board member talked about coordinating with other arts organizations. A board member from an international NGO said, “Our mission allows us not to take sides.” Being open was the solution used by a youth organization when they were faced with a situation where the organization is accountable to youth in two separate, distinct neighborhoods — one black and the other white. When parents complained about the shabby condition of the game room, “We sat down with them and opened our books . . . they are (now) part of the team to solve problems.” One international NGO board member was even positive about the role of large donors. “If a microcredit program doesn’t work, the donors will leave. That is a kind of practical accountability.” Another board member noted, “corporate contracts have a high level of accountability, even though the financial contribution is not high.” She went on to say, “State government has a low expectation, yet we get most of our money from them.”

Almost half of our respondents interpreted accountability to mean fiduciary responsibility or accountability to funders, which can conflict with other accountabilities. A board member of a program that is “heavily regulated” said there are annual audits, preaudits, and reviews. “The board president must sign off on everything.”

Both board members of one international NGO alluded to conflicting accountabilities between donors and beneficiaries. They talked about how their organization had to borrow money because large official funders were slow in dispensing support. They also complained about rigid reporting requirements. “At times we have taxed our staff here in [city] to do more internationally.”

Another international NGO board member worried about heavy USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) funding. “We are dominated by that, driven by AID funding.” Another spoke about the risk of going where the money is, “We are no different. We have to make sure we know what we are doing and stay focused on our mission.”

Yet a major youth and family organization board member felt that a large welfare-to-work contract with the government had freed them from constant fund-raising pressures. Board members from

both a large and a small international NGO spoke about the importance of leveraging their resources through working with other NGOs on skill exchanges and field collaborations. “[My organization] has no big donor influence. It’s better to be flexible.... My role is that I get in here all the time.... I do a great deal of fund-raising....”

Some respondents felt the challenge of competing accountabilities more personally. As one board member observed, “They all [different nonprofits] want me to raise money. I am in conflict every time I turn around. But my philosophy is to help them [her friends and acquaintances] spend their philanthropic dollar wisely.”

Several respondents mentioned accountability to professional excellence or knowledge. For example, a symphony board member mentioned that they were accountable to the American Society of Composers, Artists and Publishers. And an international NGO board member emphasized the importance of being accountable for professional knowledge about public health through the organization’s commitment to first-rate public health operations in the field and through board members who are medical professionals publishing articles about the organization’s latest findings.

One board member commented on the accountability of the nonprofit sector in general. “We spend a lot of money in that sector. How do we keep the sector accountable to the communities we serve? You have to prove you are there to help. That is the highest level of accountability. How do we talk about board involvement? How do we stimulate a public conversation about being on any board in our society? Many people don’t understand the importance of the nonprofit sector. A local foundation that we visited said it is a lot easier to make money than to give it away. How do we fund the sector so that it is flexible and not driven by funding?” And another asked, “Are we accountable to ourselves? If not, who will blow the whistle?”

Public Knowledge of the Organization

Among most of the respondents, there was general dissatisfaction about the lack of knowledge in the community about what their organizations did. For example, a board member of a youth and family organization observed, “There is little understanding in the wider public of what we do for kids. We need a better sales job.” And another observed, “I wish there were a way to engage people in understanding the needs and wonderful things that are happening in [an African country]. A more sustaining emotion than guilt is needed.”

Several board members lamented that what the public does know bears little resemblance to what their organization actually does. When asked what the public knows about her organization one board member said, “We sell cookies. That’s the public perception of what we do.” A member of another board said, “I think they still see us as a recreational program. Our job is to tell them that we are more.”

Some board members think that certain segments of the community know their organizations, but the public as a whole does not. “The court systems know us, the churches know us.” A member of a different board said, “There are pockets of recognition. An African American board member said, “The white community knows us, but the black community does not.” Another offered, “A mother may not know [name of the organization], but she can learn about the work we do from her social worker.”

At the most successful end of the public-awareness scale was an international NGO that focuses on refugees and has close ties with a broadcast network affiliate, which are activated during international crises. Yet even the board members of this organization were frustrated that it took a humanitarian catastrophe to get people interested. As one board member, who exemplified most of the others, said, “Most people just don’t know about us . . . people whose only interest is golf, no. If they are people with an interest in citizenship, maybe about half know about us. I know this from talking to people I know.” And another added, “It’s like pulling teeth. Except for volunteers.”

This same lack of interest/knowledge was expressed by a symphony board member, “Working-class people have had little exposure to classical music.” Yet a board member from a large international NGO in a small city with a major university guessed that most of the well-educated people in that community had never heard of them either.

Using Publicity and Media

Board members from both a youth and family organization that had received positive press coverage and the arts organization that said the press is “just not interested” expressed frustration about how rarely their activities are reported in the local paper. The local paper, said one, “Doesn’t even care that reading scores were raised by the arts program.” Or in the words of a board member of the smallest international NGO we interviewed, “There is only one newspaper, and we have had very poor success in getting them to blow our horn. If there is one thing I would like to do, it is to bust the stonewalling of the media. ‘We gave you an article two years ago,’ they say.”

On the other hand, two board colleagues from an international NGO told us their executive director regularly writes op-ed pieces, which the paper is happy to accept. And a board member for another international NGO told us that the paper was “starved for news” and would probably print something if the organization made an effort to write it.

A board member for an organization that provides emergency shelter expressed a sense of urgency about getting the word out to key constituencies. He felt they needed a communications and awareness strategy so that teenagers know where to turn when they are in trouble.

In addition, most respondents are not relying solely on the media for publicity:

- “I work through other organizations such as Rotary. I wear my button and ride the bus. At least once a week, somebody asks me about it.”
- “We are all mining our acquaintanceship on a regular basis. We speak out and host many gatherings. We mail information.”
- “I use casual conversations.”
- “We do outreach through churches.”
- “We give an international citizen award.”
- Two organizations used retired volunteers (one a former executive director) to increase knowledge of the organization in the community.
- “We are inviting community leaders in for a visit to the organization.... Anyone who has heard about us is very positive.”
- “We utilize . . . teachers talking with parents.”

One board member, from a youth and family organization, did talk about “the public part of our constituency” that is not aware, which implied that they had thought about connecting with the wider public not only as a challenge, but also as a responsibility. And some of the answers expressed dissatisfaction, as well as frustration, with typical public relations and marketing efforts. As one board member put it, “Marketing is cold . . . there must be other ways.”

Better Understanding of the Community

Several questions in the interviews related directly to the Harwood questions about how boards could provide deeper understanding of their communities.

Despite their frustration with public relations and marketing as a way of reaching more people, most board members did not respond immediately to the question about how they could better understand their communities. Indeed, there seemed to be a disconnect between this frustration and thinking about a broader understanding of their community. Although a few people mentioned the use of focus groups, most continued to respond as if we were still talking about public relations and marketing.

Some respondents did talk about “honoring relationships.” Both respondents from one international organization, for example, talked about award ceremonies for key decision makers. A youth and family organization has children as speakers for their banquets.

Others focused on volunteers and the need to give them more than menial work. The two international NGOs with retired volunteers working with Interaction to better connect them with the community, described these volunteers as a major resource that the organizations could not otherwise afford in terms of staff time.⁹ “Most

⁹ Interaction is the major umbrella organization of international NGOs in the United States. In 1999, Interaction received support from a grant-making foundation to better connect their member organizations to six U.S. communities.

of our local board members are involved in reaching out to the local community through breakfasts, lunches, promoting exposure to country directors, and bringing people in as volunteers, who are not board members, who inform the community.”

Still others had different ideas for reaching out beyond their current constituencies, but most of these focused on possible new constituencies rather than understanding the wider public.

- “Go to the ___ Mall and reach out to immigrant groups particularly.”
- “Are there other groups out there that would be interested? Find a better way to tell the story.”
- “Participate on other boards....”
- “Work with the ___ Foundation, whose [executive] director is on our board. Write letters to the community. We need to tell people what boards do and cultivate a different mind-set.”

Two respondents, however, mentioned other methods for reaching a wider public:

- “People in new neighborhoods have little connection with the traditions of the community. Yet board members resist approaching other people. Ten people could reach out to ten others each.”
- “Pay attention to talk radio and letters-to-the-editor. We could also do a survey of public attitudes or hold a forum.”

Youth and family organization board members were able to describe a variety of methods they had already used to gain a better understanding of the community. These methods clustered into two general categories:

The first approach included letters to citizens in the community, demographic profiles, and assessments. Ultimately, these approaches were judged to be ineffective in getting the information or connection board members felt they needed. One board member noted, “The staff give us lots of information, but the board doesn’t have a mechanism for getting information.” Another said, “We sent letters, but people need a public voice that they recognize.”

The second approach was much more direct. Board members went out into the community, met with people, and participated in special events and activities. The chair of one board credits this approach with saving the program, which was on the verge of having to close its door because of poor past management. “A couple of years ago, getting out and mingling with the public helped keep our doors open.” Another board member described how the board participated as a group in citywide celebrations. As a board member of the only membership organization in the survey said, “We are the community, and we are an activist board.”

Professionalization

The question about tradeoffs between increasing professionalization and weakening grassroots ties was not fully acknowledged by some respondents, or was described as a lower priority than other concerns. Several people did acknowledge the shift from grassroots volunteers to professionals. They considered attracting highly skilled people to both board and staff as a plus. Others expressed satisfaction at having people who understood business, or had specialized skills on the board. They also lamented the prospect of losing qualified staff who ultimately leave low-paying jobs with their organizations to seek better opportunities elsewhere. And although board members acknowledged that they lose community people in the process, the overwhelming sense was that the tradeoff was worth it. For example, one board member noted that the board used to have more local people, “without much international experience.”

Others argued that the professionalization tradeoff had not happened. Not surprisingly, this included the all-volunteer arts organization. A youth and family organization board member pointed to a program reaching people at the grassroots level that was continuing despite a new hefty government contract. Yet, she acknowledged that there is, “some alienation among older volunteers who are not as needed. They need more recognition.”

Some international NGO board members responded in terms of their international beneficiaries at the grassroots level rather than the local community. One respondent, for example, noted, “This organization has always been very grass roots. It’s part of the organizational culture. It works with people in greatest need and [on] the lowest rung by any economic measure. All of us here at [the international NGO], to a person, identify with those folks.” Another international NGO respondent, however, acknowledged, “The most politically active person here at the local level is the husband of a staff member. We have become insular.... The top staff of international organizations are on the road for weeks at a time.... We should hire a new staff member to connect us to the international house at [a local university].”

One indicator of board professionalization (other than the “skill grids”) for international NGOs has been the move toward increasing numbers of national board members. The four international organizations we interviewed differed from youth and family and the arts organizations in that only a handful of board members live in the local community. Those we interviewed, however, were selected from among local board members. Several of these respondents volunteered that their organizations needed more local members.

Despite the general lack of concern about professionalization, there is a sense among the people interviewed that it is their personal commitment that makes them unique. They explained that skills alone are not enough, that you must also have “passion for the work of the organization.” Not surprisingly, this included the all-volunteer

local symphony organization. Other respondents commented, “at times in the past, board members had shown a lot of commitment and devotion to the organization. One board member said, “The board went into its own pocket to make payroll.”

Evaluation

Another way of asking board members about how to understand better the communities where they work and to understand the pressures from donors was to question them about evaluation. When we asked how organizations measured the accomplishment of their missions, most respondents seemed to instinctively like the idea of qualitative evaluation, even though some mentioned quantitative indicators such as attendance at cultural events, “the numbers who leave at intermission,” child mortality, or recidivism.

- “It was seat-of-the-pants at first. We have breakfast each week with our grantees. Our board conversation centers on what services, to whom, and at what cost.”
- “Information from teacher advisory groups, results of focus groups, review of evaluation forms, ongoing dialogue with art partners, and feedback from the artists.”
- “The looks on kids’ faces, kids’ career choices.”
- “Qualitative evaluation names the ends in terms that comply with the Carver approach . . . even in banking, the quantitative part doesn’t take much time. Even quantitative evaluation should relate to qualitative issues. The only quantitative evaluation that means something is if we can provide arts classes for more low-income people.”
- “We don’t do much except assess audience and soloist reaction. But it is not good when we don’t have any evaluation of things and then we decide we can do it that way again. People don’t keep records. We forget our own history.”
- “Here are the important questions. Have they learned basic health messages? Do they feel they are better off?... The downside is that it is very expensive. Do they feel confident they can face the AIDS crisis? Women with money can say no to unprotected sex with a husband. The best seat-of-the-pants evaluation is the strong demand for savings and credit . . . they hid the money before. It tells us we are meeting a need. I was on the board when all you did was raise money . . . no evaluation. Now the first requirement of a new board member is to pay your way to visit one of our projects.”
- “There is a difference between how others evaluate us and how we evaluate us. One can see the [negative] results of their evaluation, but that doesn’t mean we do a good job either. When I came on the board, evaluation was at a D-level. We are now moving up from C. A strategic-planning process is going on. It is making the board more responsible.”

What we did not hear was anything about the possibility of citizens evaluating and reflecting on their own processes of community learning. Nor did we hear anything about how nonprofit organizations might relate to this type of citizen engagement if it did occur.

The Wider Public

When asked how their service on the board relates to their sense of responsibility as a citizen of the community, nearly everyone expressed a desire “to give something back to the community that nurtured them.” One respondent described board membership itself as an “extension of citizenship,” partly because all of his colleagues were on other boards as well. Another talked about his own “family tradition of service.” And another added, “Because we are small we can be partners with the community.” Only one board member, from the symphony, talked about leadership. “I was trained to be a participator and to provide leadership in return for things I have the chance to participate in. Maybe it’s being a worker, not [just] a leader....”

Board members from all four of the arts organizations emphasized that they understand their citizenship as focusing on the quality of life for the entire community. As one board president observed, “One of our many problems is the chosen isolation of human beings so that their interaction is electronic....” A symphony board member wanted to extend the reach of the organization beyond the town where it is located and for which it is named. “Our name defines us too locally.” Board members of the arts center saw their outreach to inner-city schools as a step toward the wider public and were concerned about not appearing “elitist.” One of them also added, “I’d like a bigger auditorium. Then more groups and people could use our space. We don’t have to use this building only for artistic events.”

Youth and family organization board members had a different take. “We help other people become contributing citizens through job training.” Another observed, “When you help women, you help children. Drugs and alcohol disrupt the family system. You instill a sense of responsibility for the children.”

Two people were surprised by, but particularly liked, a question about how their board membership related to their citizenship in their community. An arts board member said, “What a great question. I’ll use it with the board.” And an international NGO board member replied, “Wow, what a question. What comes to mind is I was attracted by the passion. It has allowed me to become engaged in the international health scene. I attended a significant conference on public health and human rights. It has opened another avenue for me.”

Most of the international board members struggled seriously with the citizenship question. As one said, “It’s not very clear. So much of our work is in [an African country].” Others took some time to answer and considered the question about citizenship in the wider community seriously. As one explained, “It is easier to see how my

involvement on other boards fit, because they tend to be organizations that are literally community-building. Whereas, this one seems to me to be closer to being a citizen of the world.” Another observed, “It has everything to do with being a good citizen. We are responsible for conditions on this planet. What happens in Somalia affects our lives. We are part of the human family.” Still another mentioned that she brings “materials and training processes back and forth between my job and here. I use strategic planning and community forums. Our international program ‘Credit with Education’ has shown me how to organize community meetings here.”

Two respondents seemed to reject the premise of the question itself. One said, “It would not influence my role on the board,” while a second board member replied, “I don’t think imagining ourselves as fellow citizens would change anything. We know why we are here and why we are involved.”

In an effort to advance the conversation about citizenship informally, we explained that a focus group study conducted for the Kettering Foundation had revealed that many citizens feel “shut out” of the nonprofit sector. The reactions varied. One person, who immediately understood this, observed “People do feel shut out of the nonprofit sector. Volunteer organizations network, and when you network with a specific interest such as music . . . we both know many other people that you don’t ask.” But another reacted with, “Shut out? There are 21 nonprofit mental health organizations alone in this county. There are so many nonprofits that if you feel excluded it is your own fault.”

Conclusions

The Harwood study of school boards, pass-through organizations, and civic organizations described a board mind-set that defined communities as fragmented constituencies, seemed fixated on funding, and was unlikely to question increasing professionalization.

We first asked if this mind-set varies among nonprofit industries. Since our targeted sample is small, it would be hard to claim that there were significant differences by “industry.” While we found one apparent difference among the “industries” we examined (reliance on strategic planning), the mind-sets related to fragmentation, funding, and increasing professionalization did not seem to vary among industries.

What was surprising was that our entire sample differed significantly from the random sample of board presidents interviewed by The Harwood Group with respect to understanding community. In contrast to the Harwood interviews of local pass-throughs, school boards, and civic organizations, none of our 27 respondents described constituencies in terms of racial, religious, ethnic, or neighborhood groups that had to be dealt with or balanced. This may also explain why only one person mentioned community divisions or frag-

mentation. The one respondent who did talk about racial differences described how an open-communication process diffused what could have divided the community.

Our 27 interviews did, at least partially, appear to confirm the Harwood findings about boards being fixated on fund-raising. Most respondents described fund-raising as their greatest challenge. However, pressure from large donors and competing accountabilities did not seem to apply to all organizations that have large donors.

The Harwood findings on professionalization seem to apply only partially to our respondents. On the one hand, we had a sense that most of them had not fully grappled with the tradeoff between professionalization and weakening grassroots ties. On the other hand, a number of respondents told us their board processes had become more open since the staff had become more professional. The combination of professionalization and commitment to mission appears to contribute to the vitality and effectiveness of both boards and staffs. It is also possible that more open board processes are a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for connecting with the wider community.

Are nonprofit organizations that do not define their primary mission as civic more able, paradoxically, to develop deeper understanding of their communities and ties to the public than civic specialists such as pass-throughs, community foundations, and civic organizations?

At this stage, we would have to say that our preliminary research has not even begun to answer this question. Of all of the respondents we interviewed, however, the six board members from three of the four arts organizations did seem to have the most expansive view of their mission in relation to the entire community.

How would we answer the general questions posed at the end of the Harwood study?

1) How far can professionalization take us in terms of accountability and credibility?

We suggest that the combination of professionalization and commitment to mission deserves further study.

2) What are the implications of pursuing constituencies? Does this increase community fragmentation?

The way that board members define constituencies may have important implications for increasing or decreasing community fragmentation. The Harwood Group interviewed board presidents from different kinds of organizations than we did. School boards, community pass-throughs, and even umbrellalike civic organizations defined their constituencies as competing interest groups, defined by race, ethnicity, class, or neighborhood. In contrast, the board members we interviewed rarely mentioned competing interests and defined their constituencies as music lovers or people interested in international health or children at

risk. Yet when board members think only in terms of constituencies, even those *not* defined along ethnic, religious, or racial lines, it appears to narrow their perceptions of the wider public.

- 3) What does it mean to have a deeper understanding of a community, and who can speak with authority to provide such understanding? Can this understanding be provided merely by having better procedures, smarter board members, and stronger staff?

Most board members understood that they need to know more about the wider community, even though the board members of international NGOs sometimes struggled with the concept of the community here and the community abroad. Respondents talked about using focus groups or talking with people in malls. And the questions that we asked about this, clearly intrigued people. A few board members told us that better procedures were insufficient. As one person said, “When boards don’t have a mechanism for gathering information about the community, they feel there is a gap in the knowledge.” Another said, “Marketing is cold, there must be a better way.”

Yet most board members continued to describe their outreach efforts in terms of constituencies.

- 4) In terms of accountability, what is valuable and to whom? How might the community measure a program’s value?

There is a clear understanding that numbers alone cannot answer these questions. What board members do not seem to have thought about is the idea that a constituency or community might track its own learning process.

- 5) How do board members truly see and act within a community? What would it mean to reexamine mind-sets and alter institutional practices?

Almost all of the board members were active in their communities and belonged to other boards. Further research might reveal whether networking appears to shut other citizens out.

- 6) To whom do boards see themselves accountable? To the public?

The board members we interviewed saw themselves as accountable mainly to constituencies, which included funders. Some respondents, however, talked about being accountable to the mission or to the wider community.

- 7) How could deeper understanding of the community be balanced with independent professional judgments?

Respondents had trouble with this question, although most of them liked the idea of understanding the community better. It may be that understanding the community is a skill in itself. Concern about a possible tradeoff between professionalization and understanding the community better was not often evident in the interviews.

8) What, if any, alternative activities are boards initiating to immerse themselves further in their communities and deepen their understanding of their communities?

Although only a few organizations appear to be doing this, other board members responded to the question by brainstorming about possible approaches.

Among our other observations was that only 2 of 27 respondents described their current board process as dominated by 1 or 2 people, even though we probed on this issue. (The two exceptions were from the same organization.) Several did acknowledge that there were two or three people on their boards who didn't speak up much.

Nevertheless, we have to consider that some may have been less than candid, despite assurances of confidentiality, while other respondents may have been the dominant members of their boards. What makes this less likely is that a number of respondents described the pattern of dominance by a few people as characterizing the board when they first joined. This finding may have implications for how boards define and relate to the public.

A second observation stems from the widely shared frustration among our respondents that most people in the community either don't know about them or misunderstand what they do. At the same time, some researchers have argued that average citizens feel "shut out" of the nonprofit sector (Downing, 1998). Assuming, for a moment, that both of these perceptions are accurate, it is harder for organizations to connect to a disengaged public. And it is harder for a disengaged public to connect even the most significant and creative organizational missions to their own lives.

This disconnect suggests that further study might uncover how an organization's own volunteers could help build bridges to the wider community. For example, organizational volunteers who were also engaged in public deliberation might be able to connect the work of the organization to the concerns of the wider public.

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