Effective Communication between Staff and Board

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Verbal and written communications between the board and staff are critical components of an effective internal communications network. However, for some nonprofit leaders, nothing creates more discomfort than board members contacting staff directly or staff contacting board members directly—without the knowledge of the executive director. Explicit rules regarding communications between board members, executive directors and staff do not exist. However, to the extent possible, expectations should be verbalized to minimize confusion and ensure all communication needs are met.

Let’s begin this discussion by examining the communication process between board members and executive directors.

Communications between the board chair and executive director should always be open and honest. The executive director provides relevant updates and has a responsibility to ensure the board chair is aware of, among other things, organizational challenges and threats, organizational successes and staff accomplishments. Generally, a board chair has a busy schedule. Therefore, it may be beneficial to determine the most important information to communicate to the chair and her or his preferred method of communication, e.g. phone, e-mail or text. With effective communications the board chair is prepared to lead discussions in the board meetings (and communicate externally) about relevant issues within the organization.

The board chair has a responsibility to communicate, among other things, board questions and concerns, constituent and community reflections, and staff accolades to the executive director. This is not to suggest that board members cannot contact the executive director directly. In their roles as committee chairs and committee members, it is necessary for board members to connect with the executive director. Again explicit rules do not exist, however, volunteers and executive directors should be sensitive to each other’s time and not inundate volunteers or staff with e-mails and phone calls.

Generally, communication between board members and staff occurs when board members serve on committees that include staff. In this scenario, board members and staff work collaboratively to fulfill the goals of the committee—thus fulfilling the mission of the organization. Generally, communication is focused on the activities of the committee as opposed to establishing organization-wide policies. Within this framework board members and staff should focus on the task of the committee and defer communications best suited for an executive director or board chair to the appropriate person(s).

Executive directors should avoid making derogatory remarks about the board chair and board members at staff meetings. Conversely, board chairs and board members should avoid making disparaging remarks about the executive director to constituents, board members, and staff. An open and honest communication model provides mechanisms for constructive and meaningful feedback.

Listed below are recommendations for building an effective communications model. Within your organization what else can you add to this list?

Recommendations
Include a section on how to communicate with staff in your new board member orientation packet.
Include a section on how to communicate with board members and volunteers in the new staff orientation manual or personnel policy and procedure manual.
Determine who can speak on behalf of the organization.
Establish a process for resolving conflict - whether internal (staff) or conflict amongst board members.

The executive director and board chair are co-leaders of the organization. As leaders they should model the behavior they want the staff, board members, constituents and volunteers to emulate. Effective communications is important to building good relationships.

The Colorado Nonprofit Association is an excellent source for information. The Association has access to resources and consultants that can assist you with designing strategies to enhance the talent and create a sustaining organization.

Carolyn Love, Ph.D. is the founder of Kebaya Coaching & Consulting. Their vision is to maximize leadership talent and enhance the performance of managers and leaders in nonprofit organizations.