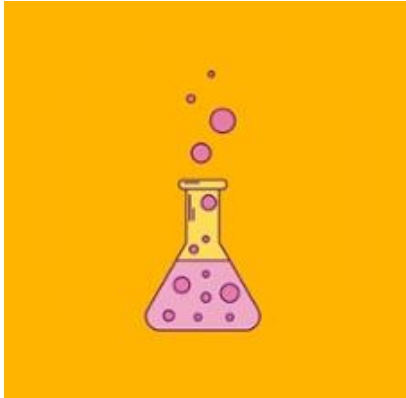


Nonprofit Boards Attuned to Innovating Ubiquitously

Posted by **Loretta L. Donovan** on Oct 10, 2017 2:31:00 PM



*This post is one in a series written by nonprofit leaders who are presenting sessions at the **2017 BoardSource Leadership Forum** taking place in Seattle next week, October 18-20. We hope you will be joining us there.*

I can clearly remember standing in the wings, supporting speakers and awards on stage at the Waldorf Astoria. As a senior manager at a well-known New York City nonprofit, my role was often behind the scenes as high-profile board members took the microphone, attended board meetings, or chaired committees. Their involvement was balanced by the local neighborhood board members who had come up through the volunteer ranks. Both groups filled specific needs of the organization. The first, providing media attention, networking with philanthropists and donors, and making their own annual contributions. The second, acting as connections to the people and programs around the city, anchoring board activities in the mission, and providing hands-on assistance in innumerable ways. Their strengths may be familiar in other organizations today. They were attuned to a nonprofit world that is fast disappearing... one where change was not perceived or dealt with.

Boards today must toggle between performing in the present and thinking forward to (imagining, strategizing, and preparing for) an unseen, improbable, and disruptive future to position their nonprofits for persistent success. What can make that possible?

A new set of criteria for identifying and mentoring next-generation board leaders is a good start. The benchmarks need to incorporate core strengths already noticed by companies and used in recruiting high-potential employees. At the top of that list is a mindset for innovation and breaking the mold of traditional strategy. And, the new board member must be a continually learning and collaborating, internally and externally. Rather than merely seeking board members for their fame and fortune, or their historical involvement, it's time to put value on abilities such as the following:

Recognizing: Boards need people who watch the world around them — including the nonprofit's clients, programs, technologies, and competitors. Their observations help them see and imagine new ways of doing things.

Questioning: More than listening to reports or rubber-stamping decisions, they need to start asking questions, great probing questions that assess potential, gauge risk, and evaluate performance with an eye to the future.

Anticipating: The potential of novel ideas, partnerships, and arrangements can help the board discover new directions by connecting apparently unrelated questions, opportunities, or resources and seeing forward to their possibilities.

Networking: By cultivating a diverse set of contacts who vary wildly in their backgrounds and perspectives, board members becomes informal researchers. Instead of just seeking out donors for funds or resources, they actively search for new ideas by talking to people who may offer a radically different view of things.

This is a transformation of perspective and performance. A board with a portfolio of members who can face the nonprofit's continuously emerging present and undiscovered future, filled with demands and uncertainties, armed with these capabilities, will become an alliance of inspired and energized leaders and partners to the executives and staff, with a full range of strengths.