

Planning for Action Will Help Your Board Members Forget to Be Forgetful

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*This post is one in a series written by nonprofit leaders who are presenting sessions at the 2017 **BoardSource Leadership Forum** in Seattle, October 19-20. Please consider joining us there.*

You will remember about 58 percent of this after 20 minutes, 33 percent after a day. That's according to one study, with other studies showing varying levels of forgetting after you

learn new information. The “forgetting curve” plots memory against time with a deep concave decline as soon as information is shared. You will forget most of what you read here in little time at all.

I think about forgetting as I deliver the “**Boards in Gear**” trainings across Washington State. Typically, 50 to 80 board leaders attend these trainings to learn the secret sauce to having an awesome board. Some are war-weary from years of dysfunction; others are new to service and just want to do the right thing. They come to learn information that they will forget within hours, days, and weeks to come — unless they take the antidote: planning for action.

When we plan for action, we acknowledge and address the four barriers to action: the environment in which we live and work, tools to move us forward, knowledge and skills related to what we are trying to do, and our emotions—or how we are feeling about ourselves and the task at hand. Once we do away with the barriers, there are

three accelerators of action: having a clear focus, taking time to reflect, and having the support of a team.

I think of this in terms of climbing Mount Rainier, our glorious mountain in Washington, originally called Tahoma by the Puyallup people southeast of Seattle. Getting to the top of it requires a clear day, a set of tools (maybe a compass, ice pick, and rope), some knowledge and skills related to mountain climbing, and confidence. All good, but you are still just at base camp. You are also going to need a clear focus (summitting in this case), reflection that connects what you learned with what you are experiencing, and a team to get you up the hard slopes. 4 barriers + 3 accelerators = success.

How do you help your board members not forget to do what you hope they do? You plan for action.

- You ask that they take the time to understand and maybe change the culture and larger social or political environment in which they work.
- You provide them with real tools—templates, worked examples, contact lists, etc. – to shorten the time to implementation.
- You make sure they have a way to learn those things that are really helpful for them to know and be able to do, such as workshops and webinars, setting aside time in board meetings for board development, and board service orientation.
- You honor and harness the emotions they bring to the task. Feelings about our work matter far more than we tend to acknowledge. As Chip and Dan Heath wrote in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, our emotions are the elephant beneath us as we ride around as rational thinkers.

We forget a lot. Often we forget because we lack the context and conditions to remember and then take action. If we plan for action upfront, we set up our board colleagues for success. Now that is something worth remembering.

This is a lot to remember. For a short video on these ideas, go [here](#). For a worksheet, go [here](#).