

FAQs FROM BOARD GOVERNANCE IN A CRISIS WEBINAR

- 1) Our organization does not currently have an ED... can you speak a bit more on advice for how board can support general staff?

The Executive Director (ED) is the point person between the board and staff when there is an executive director. When you don't have an ED and you have a staff and a board it's a group and another group where communications can get muddled and therefore not as streamlined. And in a disaster situation we need more and better communications not less. So one suggestion is to name someone on staff to be the board liaison – not as a temporary ED but to play a specific role relevant to this and future crisis times. This person can take this role as a partner to the board. To do this, first need to convene a group from the board (full board or a few members for a conversation), then need to talk to the staff. Should be asking both groups - what do you need/how are operations going from your perspective? These questions will help you put a plan in place to help the organization move forward.

- 2) What are some specific approaches/actions that government funders and philanthropy should do in response to the current moment (releasing restrictions, changing timelines, ...), and that nonprofit Boards should advocate for?

From the community foundation perspective, we have heard from staff and encouraged Executive Directors to ask for what they need and change our grant timelines as needed to reflect the needs of grantees.

Exciting conversation happening in the field of philanthropy right now where a number of foundations are signing on to a pledge to shift practices during this time to be more flexible and responsive, providing changes to grantmaking practices. This is also a perfect example of how boards can engage in advocacy– calling funders and government agencies you're in contract with/working with to talk about the importance of loosening up ties that have traditionally come with funding. For example, a board member can ask for multi- year – general operation support, extended timeline for a grant through a no cost extension or an emergency grant given our current circumstances. Also there is the opportunity to increase voices around the issue of asking private foundations to increase their payouts – lots of money in endowments and now is the time when it is needed the most.

- 3) Your distinction between governance and management seems to presume that the CEO is above reproach in his handling of the business of the organization and that the board should not offer specific guidance unless requested by the CEO. But what if the CEO is not appropriately representing the organization in one particular area and needs help (but doesn't recognize it, or is unwilling to acknowledge it)? Sometimes the CEO needs tactical advice that will be mischaracterized as micro-management. What then? The CEO cannot be tactically autonomous.

The ED's purview includes operations so we need to give them leeway however when and where an ED is not operating in the best way for the board and/or operations and that the ED is doing something that is not in the best interest of the organization, is unethical, illegal, dangerous, or risking the health/safety of community or staff – then this is a performance issue that should be raised with the board. It is important that this is not just a difference of opinion – the board has a fiduciary responsibility, if you feel there is something wrong, to do something and raise concerns.

- 4) In your opinion, what are the new approaches that organizations can take in an adaptive context that would be positive and exciting if they continued after the world comes back?

We are in a position that now we know what we can do virtually versus what we thought we couldn't before. How can we serve folks that you weren't before? For example, in my neighborhood there are now online adoptions for animals– the organization figured out a way to do meet and greets for animals – figured out a way to do this safely wearing PPE and now there are pet adoptions. We've also seen so many beautiful examples of how symphonies are playing separately, performing artists are doing plays. The creativity comes when talking to others and letting go of what we thought we couldn't do before. You know your environments best so talk to clients ask if they have ideas how to innovative given the current context.

- 5) How should we handle onboarding new board members and members that have previously not been active?

Depends on what's happening with organization and board. If the board and the organization are not terribly disrupted, then don't need to suspend recruitment – can do virtual conversations and virtual onboarding. Should remember access when recruiting onboarding including for people that may not have access to computers/internet – may need to go back to mailing out board packets and materials to ensure there is adequate access. However, if the organization is in crisis with leadership and financially then maybe this is not the best time to bring on a new member – unless they could be a great resource and provide assistance given the current issues. This is case by case. If you have new board members – now is not the time to have them floating out there – now is the time to make sure they are connected – establish a board buddy program. If a board member is not engaged – have someone who is engaged call and personally check in – ask why they aren't engaged- can they re-engage – if not, can they step away (say with grace and love) to ensure that there is clarity around roles and actions to move forward.

- 6) What advice do you have about rethinking operations for the long-term - such as programming and new staffing plans? How do you best plan for the long-term when you don't know when you'll be able to resume operations? What are the guidelines for planning contributed income?

In 2008, we took contributed income down by 30% on advice of the board. It was a smart move.

Do the scenario planning – ask a few people on the board to form a task force – or if they can shift some of their previous committee work to take this on. What would it look like in 6 months to one year for the organization? What is the story of the programming/staffing/finances – assume 3 different scenarios – play it out – including partnership plans. Don’t be too wedded to it because it will likely change.

- 7) Speaking of annual meeting, what are your thoughts regarding onboarding new board members at this time?

If you have recently brought on new members, you should definitely do thoughtful onboarding. As always, it’s important that new members are informed, supported, engaged, and understand their specific role and ways to contribute. Onboarding can be done with video meetings, calls, even virtual site visits. And certainly documents can be provided through email, online access and even mail.

- 8) With Board member’s individual problems COVID is causing, it is very hard to keep members engaged and focused on the nonprofit's work. What can we do to keep folks engaged?

We must accept that some board members are not able to fulfill their duties or provide support at the same level they once did due to their own health, security and safety concerns. Check in with them to find out how they are, see if they need any help that perhaps other board members can provide. And, if they need to shift their priorities to their own families and they cannot be engaged, let’s allow them to take a leave or resign. They can come back later.

- 9) Based on what you said, the ED is the one proposing the changes within the organization and the Board should help and give input on it, correct?

Not exactly. I meant that we need to be mindful of roles and know when it is appropriate to play which role. In governance, the board should indeed continue to play a stewardship and fiduciary role, as always – in partnership with the ED. But in management, that is when the board should be following the ED’s lead and providing support based on the needs of the ED.

- 10) Can you recommend a few resources for non-profits that are just starting out? (First 90-180 days)

There are a number of good books on the subject: Perhaps start with these two:

- **Nonprofit Management 101: A Complete and Practical Guide for Leaders and Professionals 1st Edition**
- **Starting and Running a Nonprofit Organization 2nd Edition, Kindle Edition**

11) What about Virtual Board Meetings as a vehicle to ensure that everyone is getting their point across /being heard?

Don't assume that we can just transfer our in-person meeting format to virtual without making specific changes. A couple ideas:

- **Set ground rules and a protocol for virtual meetings that are customized to a virtual environment.**
- **Name a facilitator and have that person intentionally go around and invite each board member to provide a question or comment during the discussion.**

If you are using Zoom, you might experiment with the break-out room function to have small group discussions. Small groups are a nice way to make sure everyone has a chance to contribute. Then when you return to the full group, there is a point person to share a summary or themes from the break out discussion that incorporates all perspectives.

12) Board recruitment during COVID19?

Recruitment doesn't have to stop. What you need right now might shift a bit, so what you are looking for might shift as well, but recruitment should always be an ongoing process. However, if you are in crisis this might not be the time. If you need to postpone recruitment to tend to urgent matters, that's fine. But be sure to communicate with anyone in the pipeline so you don't leave them hanging.

13) How Boards/EDs should be thinking about potential hiring, adjustments to theories of change/strategic plans/evaluation at this time.

We spoke about this on the webinar in terms of contingency or scenario planning. If you are facing tremendous uncertainty, I suggest that we approach planning right now using scenarios. For each scenario create your strategy that includes staffing and financial plans. This doesn't have to be a laborious process.

14) How do we quickly and effectively expand staff and capacity to meet increased need? We are a very small organization that may need to get bigger. Would like to minimize growing pains at a time like this. Could be some element of changing the role of the founders.

If you have founders that are able to shift their roles, that sounds like a good plan. Sounds like a positive position to be in, and like always, growing pains can be minimized with thoughtful action. Perhaps identify a transition lead who will monitor the growth plans, check in with the team, assess what's working and what isn't and bring this information for discussion to the full group.

15) Can you recommend a few resources for non-profits that are just starting out? (First 90-180 days)

Answered above.

