15 What makes a great Board Chair?

MANAGING CONFLICT

*People who invest their energy and passion
in a difficult issue have a need to achieve clarity and
resolution. And when they do, an amazing sense
of accomplishment and commitment results.*

PATRICK LENCIONI

Conflict is an inevitable part of working with people. It is important, even consoling, to remember that conflict is a normal and inevitable part of life: "Conflict is inevitable in a setting where people have different points of view and freedom of expression is encouraged. The effects of conflict can be either disruptive and destructive or creative and constructive, depending upon whether the persons involved can work toward mutual understanding or simply an agreement to differ without disrespect. Inability to cope with conflict constructively and creatively leads to increased hostility, antagonism, and divisiveness; clear thinking disintegrates, and prejudice and dogmatism come to prevail..."[1]

The board chair has an important role to play in creatively managing conflict so that the important work of the board can continue. *Module 8: Managing Conflict Creatively* presents many ideas about conflict and tools to help manage it. (http://modules.ontarioschooltrustees.org/en/read/conflict-managing-it-creatively)Some of the ideas from this module may be found below.

Conflict on the board can arise from differences between or among individual members or member factions. Varying perspectives can sometimes seem irreconcilable. An effective board chair can be influential in managing the conflict. This involves achieving a balance between encouraging the airing of conflicting views until a productive resolution has been reached and knowing when to step in to make sure that the conflict does not prevent the board achieving its business and making necessary and timely decisions. The chair should be careful not to add to conflict by making peremptory rulings and cutting off discussion prematurely. An effective chair will set the tone, clarify the decisions that need to be reached, and make sure that all trustees have all the information needed to make informed decisions within the context of civil discourse and respect for the board's shared values.

Indeed, if managed well, conflict can lead to:

• Increased understanding of issues, factors and points of view

• Greater group cohesion through renewal of mutual respect and confidence in the group's ability to work together effectively

• Improved self-knowledge through examination of goals, values and focus

• Openness to change and adaptation

• Improved trust in the process and the people involved

• Increased collaboration

• Informed decisions rather than the forced agreements of "group think"

Good Practices in Managing Conflict

Pay attention to good interpersonal communications
No amount of written policy statements or role descriptions can substitute for regular attention to good communications practices in board meetings and e-mail communication. Boards and senior staff need to have a conversation about such practices on a regular basis. Meeting "ground rules" can help. Boards should devote some time, at least once a year, perhaps at orientation, to reflect on and discuss good communication practices. On an individual level this includes balancing "inquiry" (asking questions of one another) and "advocacy" (stating our own viewpoint), being aware of our assumptions, and being more intentional in listening to one another. Board members can be more effective if each person puts into practice the principle that one should 'seek first to understand, and then to be understood."

Operate with a strategic plan
The existence of a strategic plan or involvement in a strategic planning process that helps articulate goals, objectives and outcomes can be of great value in reducing the potential for conflict over the meaning of the organizational mission, strategic choices and priorities.

Clarify roles and responsibilities
Boards must strive to clarify the roles and responsibilities of individual members and officers (especially the chairperson) and the board's role in relation to staff. This is helpful in establishing mutual respect. An annual board orientation session is a logical place for such a discussion. Job descriptions outlining duties and responsibilities can be helpful but are seldom sufficient for clarifying roles, especially where board and staff responsibilities overlap such as in determining and working on strategic objectives.

Help develop a skilled chairperson
An effective board chair is critical to managing conflict. Such effectiveness comes from clarity about the chair's role, personal integrity, an understanding of the importance of process and the liberal use of proven facilitation techniques. A chair needs the board's support in assuming an active role in guiding the board.

Learn about conflict resolution processes

Boards and directors can really benefit from some familiarity with negotiation and conflict resolution processes before a conflict arises. Some understanding will help the organization determine the appropriate mechanism for a particular situation, including when outside assistance might be of value. Conflict resolution is regarded as a core skill area for today's leaders. It is a topic that should be introduced as part of board education and be added to the list of professional development goals for senior staff, particularly the director.

Establish a code of conduct for the board

Develop a written code of conduct for board members that sets standards and rules for their relationship with one another, with the director and with senior staff. A code of conduct ought to set some rules on issues such as confidentiality, conflict of interest, conduct at meetings and speaking with "one voice".

Encourage board self-assessment

Formal evaluation processes for the board and director are important mechanisms for direct communication and action that can improve working relationships. Boards should evaluate themselves (with the director having an opportunity to provide his/her own assessment of the relationship) and should regularly evaluate the director according to pre-determined criteria, generally based on description of roles and responsibilities.

Celebrate agreements and new understandings

Both boards and staff can do more to acknowledge the hard work that is involved in expressing and working through tough issues. We can all show genuine appreciation for openness and risk-taking. A round of "appreciation" or a celebratory event can be useful ways of drawing attention to success in managing conflict.[2]

On rare occasions, conflict between or among trustees may interfere with the work of the board. In that case, if all other attempts at managing the conflict are unsuccessful, it may be necessary to use the Code of Conduct developed by the board as a tool for guidance and support in moving forward. (See *Module 17: Developing a Code of Conduct as a Board*)

[1] From the work of Blake, Mouton & Williams (*The Academic Administrator Grid: A Guide to Developing Effective Management Teams*, 1981)

[2] Adapted from a resource by Grant MacDonald, Associate Professor at Dalhousie University and Director of the Non-Profit Leadership Program