



The Model Makes the Difference

Part 2: Roles and Responsibilities of a Board

By Al Ells, M.C.

What, exactly, is a church board supposed to *do*?
Just how much authority should they have?
Where is the line between governing and control?

The waters are murky on both sides: many pastors can recount church board horror stories, just as many board members have a litany of complaints about the vagueness of their role.

Being elected to a board is a privilege, and with it comes responsibility. Though board members approach their roles with the best of intentions, good intentions are never enough.

The required maturity to serve on a board is not innate; productive board members work to develop it over time. Decisions made by the board directly affect the current and future constituency of the organization.

Few first-time board appointees understand the specifics of their job description, which leads to unhealthy board behavior. Board members who do not understand their spiritual, legal and governing responsibilities tend to be either “yes men” or power-hungry controllers. This is frustrating for both pastor and board.

Whether you are forming a brand new board of directors, or just need to refocus your existing board, the following list is an excellent tool to guide it toward effectiveness and impact for God’s work in your ministry.

TEN FUNDAMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF A BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Review, approve and support the ministry’s mission and purpose.

One of the board’s fundamental responsibilities is to review, approve and support the ministry’s stated mission. It’s the ministry leader’s role to initially develop it and once approved, declare it. The mission should be clear and concise, and each member of the board should understand it and support it. The mission statement should be examined periodically and revised when necessary.

Select and support the senior ministry leader and provide periodic performance feedback.

If the church does not have a congregational form of government, selecting the senior minister is one of the most important decisions made by the board. The board should draft a job description and list of duties for the role, as well as a succession plan and recruitment strategy should the position become vacant. The board is also responsible for supporting its elected leader by providing feedback, as well as selecting an appropriate compensation and benefit package for him or her. Caution: Feedback should not be offered at random by individuals. Protocol should dictate that feedback may only be given by the board as part of a summary report that also encapsulates the leader's accomplishments and strengths.

Maintain effective fiscal management.

Financial stewardship is important in any organization, especially a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization or church that operates in the public trust. The board should approve an annual operating budget and then routinely monitor the ministry's adherence to it. Typically, this is done monthly or quarterly at the minimum. If the ministry is large enough, the board should require an annual audit to verify accurate reporting of the sources and uses of funds.

Approve and support the ministry's programs and services.

By nature, a ministry offers programs and services targeted to meet its constituency's needs. Management, development or administration of these programs is not part of the board's responsibility. Rather, the board's job is to ensure that the programs are consistent with the ministry's statement of purpose. The board should also get to know the ministry's programs and services through the use of statistical reports, audits, and firsthand feedback.

Look to the future and participate in planning sessions as appropriate.

Prayerful endorsement of God's unfolding purposes for the organization is a major contribution of a board. At least every other year, if not annually, the board should ask the ministry leader for the ministry's plan for the future. This is done with the goal of better understanding any needed shifts in the ministry's environment, structure and purpose. The senior ministry leader is usually responsible for this planning process and involves the board as needed.

Give liberally and participate in fundraising.

The board must ensure that the ministry has adequate funding to carry out the ministry's stated mission. As leaders in the ministry, board members should personally contribute to the ministry through tithes, as well as special offerings and fundraising projects. Additionally, the board should work closely with the ministry leader in exploring all avenues for supporting the ministry's mission, programs and services.

Carefully select and mentor new board members.

A board is designed to provide the spiritual maturity, skills, experience, perspective, wisdom and time needed to govern an effective ministry. Because no person possesses all of these qualities, and because a ministry's needs continually change, a board should institute a plan to identify and recruit additional members whose gifting and talents match its needs (in congregational forms of government, the congregation often selects board members). Once new members are selected, a board should orient them to the organization through a mentoring process. Also, to encourage a steady flow of fresh ideas and to prevent the formation of power cliques, members should have term limits and regularly rotate off the board.

Understand the relationship between board and staff.

The distinction between the board of directors and the ministry staff is of vital importance to a ministry's health. The roles are related, but quite distinct: The board governs; it does not manage or direct, whereas the staff provides spiritual leadership and direction. Since each needs the other to function properly, boards and staff must purposefully strive to maintain a high quality working relationship.

Practice self-discipline and be a team player.

Meetings are a regular occurrence for ministry boards, and each member must be a team player. Board members should never operate independently. The board only has authority when acting as a group. To ensure productivity, board members should have access to the agenda and its related materials a few days ahead of time. All members should also have an understanding of the bylaws under which they operate. Furthermore, each committee needs its own statement of purpose, strong leadership, an ability to develop consensus and present its recommendations to the full board. Lastly, the board should undergo an annual self-review process (often performed by an external consultant) to assess performance and recommend changes as needed.

Pray for the ministry, its mission and personnel.

John Wesley said, "God does everything through prayer, and nothing without it." Prayer is probably the most essential ingredient for gaining God's favor and guidance for the ministry. Board members should routinely pray for the right resolution to agenda items and come together for strategic prayer initiatives regarding key projects, problems and people. Fervent prayer is also an effective way to reduce dissension and criticalness among board members and staff.

Contact Leaders That Last Ministries at info@leadersthatlast.org for customized coaching on how to implement roles and responsibilities for your organization's board of directors.