

Dollars & Sense...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

LARRY JOHNSTON

Larry has spent over 40 years working on behalf of non-profit organizations. A well-known development and organization development consultant, coach, and mentor, he holds an M.A. degree in Organization Development and a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems from the Fielding Graduate University.

Being passionate about “transformational development,” Larry’s doctoral research resulted in the creation of Donor Value Mapping® -- a research process to help organizations increase donor satisfaction, loyalty, and lifetime value.

Having consulted internationally with clients in Canada, Europe, and Latin America, he has a special interest in fundraising, strategic management, and organizational health and effectiveness. In addition to helping design and build sustainable, high-performance development programs, much of his work entails equipping leaders and managers to successfully manage organizational change. Larry and his wife Rebecca live in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

How Bored is Your Board?

by Larry F. Johnston, Ph.D.

One of the better articles I’ve found on boards is “The New Work of the Non-profit Board,” from the Harvard Business Review (Reprint Number 96509). The article opens with the following sad but true state of affairs:

“Effective governance by the board of a nonprofit organization is a rare and unnatural act. Only the most uncommon of nonprofit boards functions as it should by harnessing the collective efforts of accomplished individuals to advance the institution’s mission and long-term welfare. A board’s contribution is meant to be strategic, the joint product of talented people brought together to apply their knowledge and experience to the major challenges facing the institution.

“What happens instead? Nonprofit boards are often little more than a collection of high-powered people engaged in low-level activities.”

The authors go on to point out that the reasons are myriad, and the ones they mention are on the money (perhaps the most important being “strategic misalignment” or “majoring on the minor” although they don’t use these terms).

But the authors don’t address something that in my experience more boards need to address: *aligning individual board member portfolios with their personal strengths.*

Prior to facilitating a recent board retreat, I suggested to the board chair that we buy each board member a copy of *Strengths Finder 2.0* by Tom Rath. The purpose was not only to introduce the board to strengths theory and strengths-based leadership, but to have them complete the Strengths Finder profile prior to the retreat. Because one of the goals of the retreat was to begin to overhaul the board and its work to bring it into

strategic alignment, the results of the individual profiles would allow us to build a strengths map showing which board members had different strengths in the four key organizational domains of *Execution, Influencing, Relationship Building, and Strategic Thinking*.

Although it will be some time before all these board members settle into their sweet spots in terms of fit with the organization's strategic agenda, one of the "Aha!"s for the group was a whole new level of clarity regarding the upside of "fit" and the downside of "mis-fit."

More specifically, the board saw how questionable it was to plug highly diverse and variously gifted board members into somewhat homogenized "governance" roles. Not only were these often tasks for which they were ill-suited by temperament and training, but involving them in these tasks kept them from doing what they were best at, from "soaring with their strengths."

You see, when we soar with our strengths -- when we make the *best* of what we do the *most* of what we do -- we not only perform better but we *feel* better and that energy is highly contagious. Recalling one of my favorite

management books of many years ago, *Zapp! The Lightening of Empowerment*, it means we're more likely to be *Zappers!* than Sappers. We infuse the board and the organization with energy rather than draining energy from both by being "mis-fitted."

Why do these mis-alignments occur? Well, the reasons are numerous, but here are a couple "usual suspects":

Paradigms -- Often the involvement of board members is determined by somewhat one-dimensional paradigms or mental models of what boards are supposed to be and do. Rather than understanding that strategy should dictate structure, preconceived or outdated structures often end up dictating functions and processes where little demonstrable value is added.

Toxic Fog -- Thankfully, fewer Christian organizations suffer from this fog nowadays, but it is without question a phenomenon that has yet to be universally vanquished. Essentially, this fog that periodically and mysteriously envelops ministries reflects the unstated assumption that there is an inverse correlation between intelligence and spirituality!

Honestly, I've seen it more times than I could recount. Hard-charging, enormously gifted and successful business people and other professionals "park" their formidable conceptual and analytical skills upon entering the board room as though somehow these would be out of place in a spiritual environment!

Often the result is that really talented individuals who earnestly want to make a difference in a great cause counter-strategically accept roles where they will be marginally effective. The predictable outcome is often an energy-sapping weariness that depotentiates board performance as well as individual performance. Needless to say, this isn't a candidate for best practices!

So if the fizz has gone flat, your board is bored and board meetings would make funeral processions look exciting by comparison, check to see if board members are really working in their areas of strengths. If they're not, you've got a wonderful opportunity to redesign, realign, and revitalize your board's contribution.

McConkey • Johnston has had the privilege of helping leading ministries to become bigger and better for nearly four decades. How might we help you?