

How to Transform Your Board from Boring to Beneficial

By Dean Savoca

I serve on several boards, from the parent board of my kids' schools to state chapters of national associations, to national industry boards. I find that boards - or volunteer armies - of any size and scope experience many of the same issues and roadblocks. As a professional facilitator, business trainer and executive coach, *and* board member, here are the three challenges I see the most often that impact the effectiveness of a board. Fortunately though, the same solutions to overcoming these obstacles can be effective for any board desiring to transform its leadership from boring to beneficial.

Lack of a Clear, Inspiring, Strategic Vision – As with any organization, a volunteer board must have an inspiring vision and understand how their efforts support it. Without it, top performers leave. The vision must be simple and clear enough for every board member to articulate. It also must be strategic so it can be used to filter board decisions. I see boards struggle with how to focus their resources when they have so many ideas they want to implement. Having a vision that is strategic serves to prioritize how resources are invested.

Solution: Set aside time at an upcoming board meeting to define and agree on a clear strategic vision. This may take some time, and even involve a retreat or an extended meeting or two, but it's truly worth the effort. Then, review it at each meeting and ensure that all activities support the vision you've established.

Lack of Accountability – One difficult aspect of boards is holding volunteers accountable to their commitments. Many people think since it's a volunteer role and not their "real job" that they have an implied excuse not to be accountable. This can be devastating for board effectiveness and negatively impact performance results.

Solution: Take a Results Management approach to leading your board members.

- Set clear expectations, including the "why". Seek mutual agreement on what's expected for the project to be successful. The clarity helps ensure the lack of surprises or unclear direction or expectations.
- Ask "what do you need from me/other board members to be successful?" and do your best to provide the resources they need to be successful. Keep it positive.
- Make volunteers and other board members feel significant. People need to know their contributions make a difference – especially volunteers. Demonstrate what you expect via your own actions.
- Build respect and trust. Respect is a two-way street that has trust as its on and off ramps. Earn respect by promising and producing. Include volunteers in decision making, if possible, and get their feedback on elements that affect them. The best way to motivate volunteers is to demonstrate respect.
- Provide feedback and accountability. Schedule routine feedback session following large project or campaigns. Include board members and volunteers. Use the philosophy of CANI (Continued and Never Ending Improvement). Ask these questions: *What was great* and *what are opportunities for continued and never-ending improvement?*

Lack of Alignment of Strengths – while some people see board positions as a way to stretch their skills or learn new skills in a way that doesn't impact their primary business, this can result in a mismatch of skills, ineffective results or lots of second guessing.

Solution: A seemingly simple way to keep volunteers productive is by aligning their strengths with their responsibilities. It may mean reorganizing the responsibilities that traditionally fall to certain board positions, but allow people to work in areas in which they will excel.

If you approach your board memberships with these principles in mind, I guarantee you'll improve the productivity and enjoyment of your board meetings, attract a higher level of interest in board participation, increase the satisfaction level of your volunteers (and gain new ones!) and provide a higher level of benefit to your organization.



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In addition to managing his national speaking schedule and thriving executive coaching practice, Dean is a member of the editorial advisory board for *Colorado Meeting + Events* magazine and the Director of Programs for the Meetings Industry Council (MIC) of Colorado. In 2014 Dean was distinguished as a national “Best in Class” speaker by the Professional Convention Management Association. He served as the 2012-2013 President of the National Speakers Association – Colorado; the Chairman of the Cherry Creek Chamber of Commerce, Denver in 2009; and has been on the Board of Directors of Destination Colorado. Dean holds a Master’s Degree in Organizational Performance and Change and is a Board Certified Coach.

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