

## Working Board vs. Governing Board?

Have you heard a comment like one of the following?

Said with pride: "We're a *working* board!"

Said slightly abashed: "We're just a working board...not a *board* board."

Said with a tinge of regret: "We've been a working board, but we have to become a fundraising board."

Is the opposite of a "working board" a "non-working board"? And is it true that governing boards don't "work"? Actually, these comments reflect a confusion between what the board does, and what *board* members do.

What's usually meant by a "working board" is one where board members actively do the organization's work—whether it's taking home-bound seniors on outings, staffing a fundraising booth at a fair, or keeping the organization's books. In other words, board members participate in program work, fundraising work, and administrative work.

When a board starts to talk about becoming less of a working board and more of a governing board, what it probably means is that the organization needs the board to change its focus of work:

- From doing administrative work to oversight of finance and administration
- From doing program work to overseeing program work
- From doing fundraising to...both doing fundraising and overseeing fundraising.

But actually, there's a difference between what the *board* does, acting as a body, and what *board members* do, acting as individuals. For example, the board as a whole hires the executive director, not the board chair. On the other hand, individual board members can offer mentoring to the executive director, but they do so as individuals, not as a body. And although we say things like, "our board raises money," what we really mean is that "board members raise money."

For organizations with staff, the board will partner with the executive director in different ways: as both a governing body and as a group of individual volunteers. And over time, the work of the board and of board members will change to reflect what the organization needs at that time.

Instead of thinking that board members will do less, discuss how staff and volunteers (including board members) will work together to do program work. Instead of thinking that the board is turning over decision-making to the executive director, discuss how the executive and the board chair will work together to decide what decisions can be made by staff and which need to come to the board. Hopefully, the board will combine the strategy and oversight work of the board (as a body) with the talents of board members (as individuals).

**Examples:**

- The board reviews program plans (developed by staff) and achievements (of the programs), while individual board members volunteer as legal advocates, meal-deliverers, and tree-planters.
- The board makes sure the budget for income is realistic and individual board members raise money through raffles or talking to county officials.
- The board makes sure that there is adequate insurance for the organization, while an individual board member (who knows about insurance) helps the staff choose a broker.

In short, the work that the board does as a body is different from the work that board members do as individuals. Both need to be done. So how about this phrase instead: "We're a working board! And part of that work is governance."