

THE NONPROFIT QUARTERLY DISCUSSION GUIDE

"What Next? For The State We're In"
Summer 2003 Issue

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Introducing the Theme

We are pleased that the Nonprofit Quarterly has been chosen to host the first article to come out of the Governance Futures Project, sponsored by BoardSource and the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard University.

Their article “Problem Boards or Board Problem?” is an invitation to examine our board and governance practices through some new lenses. In this NPQ Discussion Guide, we’ve provided some ways to initiate discussion among executive directors and among boards on some of the insights and implications of this article.

Likewise, the article “From Funders to Funders: Advice on Giving in Hard Times” invites funders to re-examine some of their common assumptions and practices around funding—especially within the current economic climate.

All of the discussion in the world doesn’t change things—unless the discussion leads you to determine what practices, if changed, can make a substantial difference to the effective fulfillment of your organization’s mission. We believe both of these articles can stimulate such discussions.

The following discussion questions are organized according to the type of groups involved in the discussion. Before getting started, please read “Tips for Facilitators” on page 6.

Obtaining Reprints and Giving Feedback

Please fill out a reprint permission form at <http://www.tsne.org/section/75.html> (allow three business days for processing). We also want to hear how you have used this Discussion Guide. Please send your feedback to Larry Peers, Director of Learning Communities, at moderator@tsne.org, or fax us using the form on page 7.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For Executive Directors

Article: “Problem Boards or Board Problems?” by William P. Ryan, Richard P. Chait and Barbara E. Taylor

Possible Convener: Management support organizations, intermediaries, foundations (for grantees), leadership programs, learning circles.

Suggested Format: Convene a group of executive directors for a discussion over lunch or for a 60- to 90-minute meeting. Send the article to participants in advance and ask them to read it. On the day itself, make sure basic facilitation ground rules are set to ensure full participation, and designate one person to act as meeting facilitator.

1. Go around the room and ask:

Did the article provoke any immediate reactions? Did the article identify any familiar dynamics of your board and/or your relationship with your board?

2. Focus on one of the major themes of the article:

The article critiques the current emphasis on “board performance,” which routinely defines the problem as a poor understanding of its role and responsibilities. The authors contend that concern is not properly one of “performance,” but rather a kind of role-distancing and ambiguity related to the ultimate *purpose* served by board membership.

To what extent has addressing this “problem” of performance been a recent or on-going focus of your board’s work? If so, what has been the result of these efforts?

3. Ask each person to take three minutes to consider the following questions individually:

What specifically can you do, as an executive director, to help your board focus on defining a more compelling purpose for itself?

How would this shift of focus -- toward activities that are related to a more compelling purpose -- impact your own role (as an ED) and your relationship with the board?

4. Divide people into groups of three or four to talk about their responses to these two questions. Have someone record the responses.

5. Return to the full group, report on and debrief what you learned—by asking, “Are there some implications of this discussion for what we currently do or can do differently with regards to our boards?”

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For a Board Within One Organization or from Various Organizations:

Possible Convener: Board chair, executive director or finance director (or for boards from various organizations, a management service organization or funder may want to host.)

Article: “Problem Boards or Board Problems?” by William Ryan, Richard P. Chait and Barbara E. Taylor

Suggested Format: The board chair reserves 30 to 60 minutes at a regularly scheduled board meeting or at a board or planning retreat. The article is distributed ahead of time. You may choose to focus on only a few of the following questions provided here.

Questions:

Initial Question:

1. Initial Question: Has our board grappled with its understanding of its roles and responsibilities recently? What has been the result of this effort? How does this article help to clarify what happened?

Questions on the Article:

2. What is your reaction to the article’s focus on the need for the board to have a compelling purpose? How does this resonate with your own experience as a board member?
3. Which of these metaphors for board work seem to fit your board’s modus operandi at this time? Why? Or, is there another metaphor that more aptly defines your board at this time?
 - a. “Substitute Teacher”—focusing on keeping order or ensuring accountability
 - b. “Monarch’s Challenge”—respect the institutional job description, but invent an unofficial job description
 - c. “Firefighter’s Down Time”—focus on preparedness for future strategic or policy decisions
4. What are some specific ways your board can direct its activity toward a significant purpose for itself, given what is happening in your organization or your community context?

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For a Group of Funders

Possible Conveners: Local board resource groups, funders.

Article: “From Funders to Funders: Advice on Giving in Hard Times,” by the editors of the *Nonprofit Quarterly*.

Suggested Format: A regional association of grantmakers or foundation collaborative may want to host this discussion for funders, or a state association may wish to provide an opportunity for funders to discuss these issues as a panel with nonprofit organizations.

Questions:

1. How has your foundation traditionally approached the issue of payout? How has the current economic downturn affected payout policies? What is the implicit or explicit philosophy or rationale guiding your practice?
2. Funding core operating costs, rather than solely supporting projects, is fairly controversial in the funding world. What is your response to the arguments for supporting core operating costs presented here?
3. Since most of the creative project grantmaking is rarely sustained or actually replicated by the government, is there a compelling rationale for continuing this strategy?
4. What do you think about the notion of an advocacy role for funders? What barriers (real or imagined) seem to account for the relative absence of vocal, cause-related advocacy among funders? What forces seem to be driving/resisting moves toward more aggressive engagement with politics and public policy issues?

TIPS FOR A DISCUSSION FACILITATOR

1. Introduce yourselves. It's helpful to begin the discussion by making sure that everyone in the group has been introduced.

2. Provide an opening question. As part of the introductions (even among people who know each other), use one “opening question” so everyone gets a chance to talk—before getting into the topic of the discussion. Some sample opening questions are:

What is one hope that you have for this discussion?

What inspires your work in the nonprofit sector?

What is something you would like us to know about you?

What “new” or “good” thing has happened in your work or your organization since we last met?

3. After posting a question, give people time to reflect. Some people are ready to jump right in to any discussion—on any topic. Others prefer time to think about their responses before entering a conversation. After posing a question, tell the group that you are going to pause first to give everyone a chance to think. This also gives participants a chance to collect their own thoughts on the topic—rather than just responding to the person who spoke before them.

4. Give a time frame for responses. Particularly if you want to hear a variety of responses or experiences, you might choose to give each participant a time limit. This also avoids the tendency for a few people to dominate the discussion.

5. Provide a structure that allows participants to focus on speaking and listening.

You may want to have people go around the circle to speak in turn. This minimizes anxiety about when to speak. If you use this structure, allow everyone the option to pass. Or you may decide people should enter the conversation when they want to contribute a thought or respond to the question. Participants should discuss and agree on a preferred structure.

6. Take time to reflect upon your response to the questions. Reserve time toward the end of your discussion to ask:

What have you learned from this discussion?

What new insights do you have as a result of this discussion?

7. Take time to determine some implications for practice. After you have reflected on what you have learned, you might want to ask:

What are some implications for your practice as a board, executive director, etc.?

What will you do differently as a result of this conversation?

Note: Some of these points were adapted from the Public Conversations Project. You may want to look at their Web site for other ideas on facilitating: www.publicconversations.org.

TELL US HOW IT WENT!

Welcome to this first issue of the *Nonprofit Quarterly* Discussion Guide.

We want to hear how you've used this Discussion Guide. Tell us about the event or experience along with any feedback or suggestions.

Please fax this page with your comments to us at 617-227-5270, or send your comments to Larry Peers, director of Learning Communities, at moderator@tsne.org.

Name: _____

Organization: _____

City _____ State/Province _____

Contact information: Phone _____ E-mail _____

1. Tell us about the discussion event you held. Was it one organization or a group of organizations? Who participated? How many people?
2. Which articles did you discuss?
3. What was helpful in this guide?
4. What could be improved?
5. What suggestions do you have for us?

THANKS FOR YOUR FEEDBACK!