Board Member Assignments Prior to a Planning Retreat

This document augments Boards on Fire, page 43

By Susan Howlett

We've all attended board retreats where we left feeling overwhelmed, frustrated or exhausted. Where a handful of the people did all the talking, and others didn't even make it a priority to attend. Here are some suggestions for creating a really satisfying board retreat where leaders participate fully and leave engaged and energized!

In preparation for board retreats, I always make sure every board member has a role. There are several reasons why I think these assignments are essential for a successful retreat:

1) Assignments build a sense of ownership about the retreat. If people have a specific task they're responsible for, they're more likely to show up, rather than call that morning to say something else has come up. They have a stake in its success and they feel like they're contributing to the retreat rather than being passive consumers of it.
2) Assignments ensure that many people get 'airtime', rather than just the usual suspects.
3) Assignments that involve research help leaders make decisions based on data rather than opinions, impressions, hunches or personal agendas.
4) Assignments make that individual the new 'resident expert' on their topic. If they've done the research on something and reported their findings to the rest of the board, they'll remember what they learned and you'll hear them bring it up at subsequent board meetings to keep what they discovered alive in the organization.
5) Assignments can be given to the person who most needs to learn that lesson. If you've had problems with a board member micromanaging staff, ask him or her to share best practices in the sector about the role of board members. (Resources must be ready to hand them so they don't go find a wrong answer elsewhere.)

Here are some no-brainer assignments about logistics:

- arrange for the venue (keys, directional signs, heat and lights, tables and chairs);
- take responsibility for AV needs (easel and flipchart, markers, computer hookup);
- bring sticky notes, note pads, pens, name tents;
- plan, order, prepare, bring, set up or serve refreshments (every retreat needs coffee and tea, cream and sugar, juice, water, fruit, pastries, chocolates or cookies for the break, and sometimes lunch);
- greet people at the entrance and help them find their way;
- welcome and integrate a new board member or guest;
- remind everyone what the mission is and post it in large letters on the wall;
- lead an exercise (start the introductions, facilitate a small group breakout);
- capture on an easel what board members bring up in a brainstorming session;
- help with clean-up at the end, taking home leftover food, gathering papers.

Having many people help with logistics means the Executive Director and Board President can focus on being leaders rather than hosts.

Other assignments concern retreat content. They'll require either reading an article or handout ahead of time, calling another organization to see how they're addressing something, or talking with staff to glean information about your organization.

The assignments will vary depending on the goals of the retreat. If you're doing **strategic planning**, here are some that will help shape and prioritize your goals.

- assign someone to locate your last attempt at strategic planning, share the highlights of it and how you've fared with each goal; (one leader per goal?)
- assign one board member to each of the program areas you engage in and have them report on any of the following that will help the board plan:
    - what problem or opportunity that program attempts to address;
    - how the staff define success and how they measure effectiveness;
    - how many people (animals, acres) are served in a year;
    - demographic profile of your constituents (age, ethnicity, income level);
    - how much it costs to serve an average beneficiary;
    - where the money comes from for that program (grants? earned income?);
    - what it gets spent on (staff salaries? physical plant? supplies?);
    - what percentage of the organization's resources are devoted to it;
    - who you partner with (agencies who refer clients to you or to whom you refer clients, government offices, other nonprofits in a coalition) and the relative health of those relationships
- assign some leaders to contact other organizations with similar missions to learn what persistent or emerging issues or opportunities are on their radar and what they think needs to be done about them;
- assign some leaders to contact any regional or national organizations involved in your field to see what they see on the horizon (legislation, economics, etc.);
- assign leaders who love to read or do online research to see what comes up in a literature search;
- assign someone to contact elected officials or government departments who are on top of your field to see how they suggest you focus your efforts.

If the goal of the retreat is to ignite a fire under the board so they'll understand and embrace their **roles and responsibilities**, consider the following types of assignments:

- share the list from BoardSource about the roles and responsibilities of boards;
- have someone look up articles (or give them specific ones to read and report on) from Blue Avocado about the roles of board members;
- ask someone to share the current board job description or commitment form and lead a conversation about expectations;
- have people contact some organizations in your community where the board is optimally engaged (give them specific ones) to see what they ask of their board and how they get people to fulfill their commitments;
- give everyone a simple board self-assessment ahead of time, and assign someone to review the responses and report on patterns revealed;

- have one board member invite someone from a more highly functioning board to come to the retreat, say something like, "We used to be like you, but then we did X, and now it's better on the other side. Here's how we navigated that change."

If you're focusing on **fundraising** at the retreat, here are some things it would be useful to know ahead of time:

- where does money come from in the nonprofit sector?
- how does our organization align with those percentages?
- what are the various things we do throughout the year to raise money? (best shown in a pie chart where each wedge is a month, or in a one-page calendar)
- what percentage of our revenue is generated by earned income, granted income and contributed income?
- how much does each effort generate, and how much did it cost us (both hard costs and human capital – staff and volunteers) to raise it? ("cost per dollar raised")
- how many gifts did we get in each gift range last year? how did that compare to the previous two or three years?
- what has been our donor retention rate over the last few years?

If you're working on your **mission or vision**, people could be asked to come with the mission statements or vision statements of their other favorite nonprofits. They could also be encouraged to bring their favorite dictionary or thesaurus, because leaders always wish they had one during mission discussions.

Assignments inevitably lead to generative conversations where leaders get to sink their teeth into meaty conversations, use their brains and put their passion to work, unlike most board meetings, which are filled with one-way communication.