

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND TEAMWORK AT THE BOARD LEVEL

When I took over as President of a non-profit organization, I had no idea the depth of the challenges facing the new board of directors. Our chapter had been in existence officially for 16 months and unofficially for 24. In January, we only had 11 members and half of those were on the board. Our programs had very low attendance. We had no energy and it showed. In the previous year, we had had only a handful of board meetings. As Vice-President at that time [and certainly not in line for the Presidency], I was not certain where the organization was headed.

I focused the group with the following steps:

1. **Create structure.** Everyone works better when they know not only what to expect, but what is expected from them. I spent several days detailing plans to take us where we needed to be. The old adage "How do you eat an elephant?" certainly fit us well. We did have governing documents, by-laws and policies and procedures, but they were in need of revising. They couldn't be revised until they were reviewed by the current board. The current board did not know we had these documents. I asked the Board to accept the responsibility of updating their portion of the manual to fit what they were actually doing. We began emailing board reports to each other prior to the meeting; at the board meeting, a quick review of the reports was all that was needed. This allowed us to spend more time on new business, on the future that was in our hands.
2. **Relate your vision.** The board as a team will make this a reality ... everyone needs to know not only how high that hill is, but what is waiting for them at the top. It was not appropriate to share my ultimate vision at the beginning; it was much greater than anything that had been suggested before. It was at our summer event that I shared my vision of the organization with the board. At that time they could envision it, could see it and grasp the "greatness" of it.
3. **Empower the board.** They hold the board position they do for a reason; give them leeway to do what they believe will work best for their committee and for the chapter. Most of our board meetings were spent brainstorming what we, as a chapter, could offer and getting that word out to our prospects. Membership took the initiative to put all our members and prospects into a web-based email system. Emails would come from the chapter address and not someone's personal email address. They also continued talking with prospects, finding out what they wanted and getting them to join. PR kept us in the local newspapers and publications, assuring we had a place in the meeting announcements. Our secretary/treasurer kept track of all the invigorating ideas tossed around the table, made sure we were aware of the action items we agreed to complete, and guaranteed that we had the money to accomplish our goals.

We empowered our webmaster to change the website as she saw fit, in the best interests of our chapter, and to let the other board members know what she did. Programs were critical to our success, and we kept them strictly industry-related. Any request I received from a speaker wanting to get in front of us was asked "What does your program have to do with our industry?" We mixed tours with industry speakers in a more traditional meeting style. We attended industry events in the area, proudly wearing our Chapter polo shirts, for now we did have a chapter to be proud of.

4. **Be a 'servant leader'** ... ask how you can help them, give them ideas, praise them, encourage them, know when they may be in over their heads, ask what you can do and follow through. They may feel unsure of what they are doing, and to give them the support and confidence they need, will work wonders. I worked with each board member to build our foundation one step at a time, one layer at a time. In the excitement that had been unleashed I cautioned members to stay focused, it was very easy for us to go off in many different directions, thus accomplishing nothing.
5. **Remember: the board is a team.** Expect disagreements, but honor and respect each other. Together you can make miracles happen! As a team, we excelled!

At our happy hour event at the end of July, we signed our 34th member! The treasurer and I each bought a bottle of champagne and member after member toasted this fabulous chapter. I nearly had tears in my eyes and was bursting with so much pride at what the board members of this organization had accomplished in only seven quick months.