

Tools for Retiring Ineffectual Board Members

Adapted from *Developing Dynamic Boards* by Dr. James Hardy

Board development cannot be done effectively without squarely facing the fact that some board members are nonproductive--they don't contribute or have lost touch--and they must be retired.

1. "Retiring" is a euphemism for weeding, pruning, or otherwise separating nonproductive members from the governance structure of an agency. It's just as important as recruiting the right people. It's also a lot harder, and a job that most nonprofits never deal with because they believe that you can't fire volunteers. That simply is not so. There are many ways to accomplish separation, but basically people who aren't performing must be given the chance to step aside and even asked to make way for others that are needed. Allowing such an unproductive situation to continue does not create the kind of positive and enthusiastic environment that is desirable. It is also a discouraging example for younger volunteers.

2. Indirect Methods vs. Face-to-Face Approach. There are many ways to subtly prod nonproductive board members or to hint that they might consider resigning. However, a direct, face-to-face, caring conversation between the member and the agency's leadership is the best approach. In such a conversation the leadership can express appreciation for contributions that have been made, while pointing out changing conditions and the agency's need for different kinds of board members. Typically, when a direct, caring and human explanation is given, the nonproductive member is more relieved than hurt. Certainly people know when they have not performed in a responsible manner and they may even be feeling guilty about the situation. In all probability, it will be helpful to remove the burden.

3. Recognizing past contributions. In many instances persons who are unproductive have at some point in their board careers been productive and helpful members if this is the case, then past contributions should be recognized and honored in an appropriate manner. The point is that the agency's leadership should act in such a way as to make the separation as amicable as possible. **But the leadership must act—ignoring nonproductive board members is failure to show good stewardship of resources and does not comply with the board's Duty of Care.**