

What to Do with Board Members Who Don't Do Anything

By Jan Masaoka, for Board Café, a free newsletter for board members. Paraphrased from Common Ground, newsletter of the NC Center for Nonprofit Boards. For Board Café, go to www.boardcafe.org or email boardcafe@compasspoint.org.

"He never comes to meetings or does anything. Why does he even stay on the board?"

"She always says she'll take care of it and then she doesn't follow through. Aaargh!"

There are two things you must do in the case of a board member who is not participating. **First, you must do something.** The problem is likely only to get worse, and non-participating board members have a demoralizing impact on even the best of boards. **Second, be confident and hopeful.** Many board members just need a little reminder to be more conscientious. Others will be grateful you've given them a graceful way to relinquish tasks or even leave the board.

Short-Term Strategies

- Check to be sure that expectations were made clear to the board member before he or she joined the board. *"I know you joined the board recently and I'm not sure that you realize that we ask all board members to attend the annual dinner and, hopefully, to help sell tickets. Let me explain what most board members do, so you can see whether you'll be able to work on this with us."*
- Hold a board discussion at which expectations are reconsidered and reaffirmed. Agree on a list of expectations for every board member.
- Be sensitive to possible health issues or personal reasons why a good board member isn't participating as much as in the past.
- Transfer responsibilities to someone else. *"I'm concerned about finishing the revision of the personnel policies. Since you're so busy, maybe it would work best if John took your notes on the policies and developed a first draft."*
- Together with the board member, explore whether he or she really has the time right now to be an active board member. *"I'm calling to check in with you since you haven't been able to make a meeting in the last few months. Are you just temporarily a lot busier than usual? We really want to have your participation, but if it isn't realistic, perhaps we should see if there's a less time-consuming way than board membership for you to be involved."*

Longer-Term Strategies

- Make it possible to take a "leave of absence" from the board if they have health, work, or other reasons why they cannot participate fully for a while. An individual can, for example, take a "maternity leave" or a "disability leave."
- Have a board discussion or a written board survey on what makes it difficult for people to participate fully. *"Are there things we can change about the frequency, day, time, or length of board meetings that would make it easier for you to attend?" "Are there things about the way that board meetings are conducted that would make it easier for you to attend or that would give you more reason to want to attend?"*
- Consider whether board participation is meaningful to board members. Have lunch with some of the "semi-active" members and / or the executive director: *"I'm sensing that board participation isn't as substantive or significant as some board members want it to be. What do you think are the reasons, and what do you think we can do to make board membership more meaningful?"*
- Revise what is expected of board members. Perhaps responsibilities given to a board member are unrealistic for any but the superboard-member. Reduce the number of committees and use short-term task forces instead. Re-design jobs and responsibilities so that a busy achiever can accomplish them.