

Some Boards Just Wanna Have Fun!

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If "fun" isn't a word you associate with board meetings, you're not alone. But, in my book, fun is a key component of effective meetings and innovative board culture, and it's something that must be conveyed to prospective and incoming board members so they aren't taken by surprise.

Most organizations do an adequate job of orienting new board members—they hand over a manual, go over time commitments, responsibilities and expectations, hit the highlights on staff support, key issues, and strategic priorities. Many of these topics should also be part of the recruitment/nomination process, as well, so a potential director can evaluate the "fit" of the volunteer position, and can set his or her expectations to match the culture of the group.

Most boards have their own unique cultures which evolve over time, but tend not to change radically from year to year. Each president or chairman stamps his or her own style of leadership on the board, but rarely do they significantly alter the overall dynamics. It is these dynamics that we need to communicate to new members of the leadership team if an organization is to stay strong and accomplish its goals effectively.

This became clear to me many years ago when I worked with a board of directors that lost one of its members because he felt the board was frivolous and unprofessional. My experience with that board—and, in fact, the entire organization—was that it was anything but those things. However, when I looked at it through Roger's eyes, I could see why he perceived it as such.

Roger's previous experience on a board of directors was quite different. It had been a large, national board that was subject to a good deal of member and public scrutiny. An attorney was on-hand at each meeting for parliamentary oversight and general consultation. No one spoke unless formally recognized by the chairman. As Roger described it, "We weren't there to have fun; we took seriously the serious business we were charged with."

When he was invited to join the board of a regional trade association, Roger brought the same understanding and the same expectations to the table. Thus, he was shocked and more than a little disconcerted to see a group of people who tended to laugh their way through board meetings. Board members spoke without waiting to be called upon, many decisions were made by consensus, and Robert's Rules were seen as a tool to help if they encountered a sticky situation, not a stick held over them to keep them in line. It had never occurred to Roger that board meetings could be both fun and productive; likewise, it hadn't occurred to his new peers on the board that they could be otherwise. That was the culture of the group.

My personal bias is for fun meetings. Over the years, I've seen that a board that

has fun accomplishes more and becomes an environment that attracts and keeps strong leaders. However, I'm willing to admit that there may be many productive boards that have not identified "fun" as one of their priorities. The key here is to match board members with their expectations, and to convey accurately the culture of the board to prospective members. Whether it's fun, formality, drawn-out deliberation or speedy action, it is essential that all board members understand the culture in which they are operating.

What's your board's culture?