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High Expectations: Who is the Watchdog for the Community's Results?

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Q: Is there more to a board member's life than just legal, organizational oversight? Is being the legal watchdog all we can really expect from ourselves? What if we expected more from boards? What if we expected them to be the watchdogs for our communities' results?

A: Boards have a legal role within organizations. That legal role varies from state to state, province to province, country to country. But typically, that legal board role has to do with some form of oversight.

- ▶ Ensure dollars are not being misused.
- ▶ Ensure personnel are treated according to the law.
- ▶ Ensure the organization's myriad assets are being protected.

Ready for a surprise?

In the United States and elsewhere in the world, there is no legal requirement that an organization provide results to the community. Seriously. There are legal requirements that boards protect the organization itself from harm, acting as the organization's watchdog. But there is no legal requirement that boards ensure the community is getting results.

Did You Join the Board Because You Love Balance Sheets?

Board members join boards because they love the mission. They want to make a difference. They are passionate about the cause.

And while no one is saying boards should abrogate their legal responsibility, they can certainly choose to go above and beyond that legal responsibility.

In addition to watching over the legal organizational issues, what if your board raised its expectations for its own actions? What if your board expected to be the watchdog over the results your organization provides to the community?

Step 1: Know Your Legal Obligations

Before we can move our work above and beyond the job of legal oversight, we first need to complete that job. So the first step is to know what the board is legally obligated to oversee, and to learn to do that.

These are the things that are easy to learn. And once your board has learned them, those watchdog portions of the board's work will be easy to do more quickly, rather than taking up the whole of the board's energies.

The effective use of reporting, dashboards and consent agendas can make the legal oversight portion of a board's work become a smaller and smaller portion of the agenda, while the board becomes more and more proficient at that oversight role - truly a win-win. (For more about reporting, dashboards and consent agendas, see the notes at the end of this Brain Teaser.*)

Step 2: Begin Talking About Expectations for the Community

What are your board's expectations? What does your board expect the organization to accomplish for the community? What difference do you expect the organization to create in the community this year? How do you expect the community to be a better place in 10 years, and in 20 years, because your organization exists?

Boards rarely talk about their expectations. They may talk about their hopes, their dreams, their worries. But boards do not spend time establishing expectations.

Yet we all know from our own personal lives that we accomplish what we expect to accomplish - what we aim at accomplishing. So what would happen if your board expected more from itself than merely oversight? What would happen if you spent time establishing high expectations, and then working with the staff to ensure the organization's results meet those expectations?

Will your food bank continue expecting to just give out more and more food boxes to those in need? Or do you want to start expecting that your community will have fewer people needing food boxes in 10 years?

Will your small theater company continue expecting to just keep struggling to find an audience for its avant garde plays? Or do you want to start expecting that you will have an ongoing stream of attendees from a broad cross-section of the community, who love your theater because they never know what they will experience?

In the end, it's not about our organizations, but about our communities. What difference do you expect to make for the community you serve? And wouldn't it be downright fun to be the watchdog over that?



For information about consent agendas

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For information about dashboards, sign up for our newsletter - that information will be in the next edition!

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For information about reporting and monitoring overall

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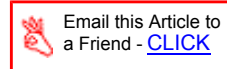
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