

# **The High Performance Board: Moving from Vision to Action to Results**

## **Faith and Fundraising Conference National Development Institute**

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I remember conducting my first local church Board two-day planning retreat. The retreat format was built around “Characteristics of Strong and Effective Board Members.” Upon completing the retreat, a board member shared with the group that “we have a year of work as a board outlined for us this weekend.” It dawned on me that a retreat setting provides a significant mentoring opportunity for a pastor/leader with the governing board of the local church or ministry organization he or she serves.

Since that retreat years ago, I have given significant time to both the characteristics of strong and effective local church boards, and also to the ways in which leaders can intentionally mentor and develop the boards they serve. Both leader/pastor and board want to move from **missional vision** to **productive action** to **significant results**. The big questions are why, who, how and for what purpose? Needing answers to *these* questions are most likely what brought you to this conference. I don't think you will be disappointed.

Three vignettes provides a glimpse into my passion for board development.

#1. In recent years I have become a "board-hugger!" The reason, I believe, is captured in the famous quote of the late president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. He gave his powerful "Man in the Arena" speech in France in 1912, and made this statement:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; ...who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Healthy board members are not those "naysayers" or "critics" who stand on the side and pass judgment on those who are giving their best for the organization they serve. I salute you, admire and respect you for your resolve to make a difference in the ministry organization, and are willing to pay a price to see those dreams come true. Healthy board members are people "in the arena!" I embrace them, and am grateful for them!

#2. In my work with governing boards for over 30 plus years, I continue to observe two dynamics about many board members. On the one hand, I am impressed with the commitment of board members, their professional abilities, and their desire to make a contribution to the organization.

Interestingly, I also see another pattern. These passionate board members who wanted to contribute their professional perspective to many of the issues facing the boards on which they serve are amazingly frustrated. Frequently I hear from them one of two broad descriptions of their boards: 1) decisions had already been made by a few who only wanted the full board to "rubber-stamp" these "decisions" that had previously been made; or 2) upon arriving at the board meetings, the agendas have not been developed and time is wasted, from their perspectives, in trying to shape the agendas for board consideration.

#3. The third vignette has to do with money...or the lack of it. Most nonprofit organizations have noble missions, hard-working staff, and dedicated board members. Yet these very organizations do not have the financial resources to accomplish their mission and realize their vision. And, most of these organizations spend significant time reviewing the financials, but not so much time in strategic thinking and planning, for financial development, and major gifting for the ministry.

Enough of vignettes.

Before I continue, I encourage you to memorize a foundational working assumption regarding local church or ministry organizations leaders and boards.

**STRONG BOARDS EMPOWER *MISSIONAL* AND *VISIONARY* LEADERS,  
STRONG LEADERS EMBRACE *PASSIONATE* AND *ENGAGED* BOARDS.**

We will return again in this session to this fundamental assumption. It is more than a slogan!

Let's begin to work through the some of the implications of this principle for strong and effective ministry organization boards.

Twelve "characteristics" of strong and effective boards are given below, with an accompanying "best practice" for each characteristic. This section is developed more fully in the book, *Best Practices for Effective Boards*, published by Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, and available on Amazon for downloading. Strong and effective boards function in the embrace and affirmation that **both** strong pastor/leaders *and* strong boards are vital and required for local congregations and ministry organizations to fulfill their God-given mission and vision in the communities where He has placed them.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG AND EFFECTIVE BOARDS

- #1. Board members understand the role, purpose, and function of the board.  
They focus on *policy formulation* and *mission strategy*,  
not *daily operations* and *policy implementation*.
- #2. Board members know, communicate, and make decisions in light  
of the church's mission, vision, and values.  
*Mission, Vision, and Values Drive them.*
- #3. Board members ask the right questions.  
They *think Questions*.
- #4. Board members understand and embrace a board policy manual that contains the board-  
approved policies for effective and efficient legal, financial, and policy governance of the local  
church.  
They "*Write It Down*" in a *Policy Manual or Organization Handbook*
- #5. Board members communicate with each other and address conflict situations as Christians.  
They *watch their words*.
- #6. Board members relate to their leaders and constituency with one voice.  
They believe that "*Character Counts, Really Counts!*"  
(*And they keep confidential conversations, confidential!*)
- #7. Board members intentionally engage in mutual accountability, including systematic board  
development and evaluation.  
For them, Board *Integrity Matters!*  
Sunshine "*disinfects.*" *Transparency transforms* an organization.
- #8. Board members take time to process decisions, with no last minute motions.  
They take the time necessary for good decision making, with *No Intentional Surprises!*
- #9. Board members embrace change and resolve to work together through transitions  
respectively, patiently, and kindly.  
Their mindset is "*Yes To Missional Change!*"
- #10. Board members participate in assessing the effectiveness of prior decisions.  
They are not afraid to *Review/Revise/Redirect/Renew*.

#11. Characteristic #11. Board members are outstanding examples of providing financial oversight and giving regularly to the church, college, or organization they serve.

They serve as *Role Models of Oversight, Generosity, and Stewardship*

#12. Board members develop new leaders for increased responsibilities and commitment throughout the church, college, or organization

They are committed to "*Pass It On*" to a new generation of leaders!

How would you modify this list with additions or deletions to make these “characteristics” a mentoring outline to guide your pastor/leader as she/he nurtures and strengthens the board? List below the top three “characteristics” or “best practices” on which you desire the board to focus during the next six to eighteen months.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Let's spend some time reviewing some of the basics regarding the governing board on which you serve.

In a video recently produced on “Building Better Boards,” I define a governing board as... “**...an elected body that oversees the ministry and mission of a local church or ministry organization between annual membership meetings.**” **A governing board of a local church or a ministry organization “is guided by the Church *Manual* and/or ministry organization Bylaws and Articles of Incorporation,” and must insure that the legal documents and policy documents are up to date.**

The big question regarding governing boards is this: “What *should* a nonprofit governing board **be** and **do** to function as a strong and effective board who “governs diligently, effectively, and missionally?”

It is a privilege and responsibility to be elected to not-for-profit governing board. Serving on this board is a ministry and a *sacred trust*. You make decisions as a board *on behalf of others*. One author states that "*board holds the future and mission in trust.*" A powerful statement. A profound responsibility.

The board's duty requires it to **ensure** that spiritual, human and material resources of the ministry organization or local church are used *for the benefit of its mission. It's all about the mission!*

Organizations, including local churches, evolve and change. So must their governing boards.

Change is inevitable – change in *demographics, expectations, economics, technology, government, and education* –just to name a few. Problems arise in the **transitions**. How *do* we adjust to the facts, context and trends we face in the changing community, country or region in which we work and serve?

Understanding transitions is important for boards. How we manage the transitions can *facilitate* or *derail* the increased influence and impact, and financial development we envision for the organization or church we serve.

Growing nonprofit organizations, including local churches, need strong and effective governing boards in order to identify *new* initiatives and *clarify* the vision needed for increased influence and impact, and for expanded numerical and financial growth. Otherwise, decline will be the result. Remember:

**STRONG BOARDS EMPOWER *MISSIONAL* AND *VISIONARY* PASTORS, and  
STRONG LEADERS EMBRACE *PASSIONATE* AND *ENGAGED* BOARDS.**

Let's burrow down to discuss several of the above mentioned characteristics of strong and effective boards.

**Characteristic #1. Board members understand the role, purpose, and function of the board.**

*They focus on policy formulation and mission strategy,  
not daily operations and implementation.*

*Think of it this way: Heads In, Fingers Out!*

To lead and be effective as a governing board means to function *appropriately* in the three modes of board governance:

1. The FIDUCIARY mode. In this mode of thinking, the board seeks to:

ensure the legal and financial integrity of the ministry organization or church;  
serve as a faithful steward of the tangible assets (property/buildings/etc);  
approve and deploy resources missionally and wisely;  
guard the long term health and mission accomplishment of the organization.

2. The STRATEGIC mode. In this mode of thinking, the board is:

a planning partner with the leader;

proactive in strategic planning for mission and vision fulfillment;  
intentional in fund-raising and financial development planning;  
aggressive in reviewing the strategic planning *documents* in light of the mission of the organization;  
persistent in *assessing* the context within which the ministry organization or local church is placed to insure that the strategic plan is current and relevant.

3. The REPRESENTATIVE mode. In this mode of thinking,  
comments are rooted in the values of the organization;  
questions are framed to taking into account the heritage of the organization;  
concerns are expressed in terms of the consistency with Manual or Handbook policies of the organization;  
policies are developed, and priorities are established consistent with the organization's mission, vision, and values.

The board has fiduciary, strategic and representative governance and coordinating responsibilities for the organization in at least the areas of:

1. Mission and vision clarity
2. Strategic thinking and planning
3. Financial health, oversight and budget approval
4. Major gifts and capital development
5. Mission implementation, strategy and review
6. Curriculum consistency (if needed)
7. Denominational or organizational connectivity
8. Property oversight, expansion, and legal standing

Healthy board members have their **heads fully engaged**, with mind, eyes, ears, and the words spoken actively pursuing the fiduciary, strategic and representative responsibilities within the board meetings. However, strong and effective board members do **not** get involved in the day to day operations of the organization. Effective boards empower their leaders to administrator the organizations. The Board's responsibility is to insure that the the policies and strategies approved by the board are implemented. "Heads in, Fingers out."

**Characteristic #3. Board members ask the right questions.**

*They "Think Questions"*

Think of it this way: **ASK STRATEGIC QUESTIONS**

What **is** the most *critical issue or major concern* facing the board?

What legal documents need to be reviewed *at least* annually, and made available and maintained in a safe place, with copies made readily available to the board members?

What three *big ideas* should the Board focus on for the next three years?

These and other “big questions” can only be asked and thoughtfully discussed if the board agenda has been intentionally developed. Cultivate the discipline to “think questions.” Not just any questions. Strong and effective boards ask the *right* questions.

Problem-framing questions probe the big issues and help define the real problems:

Who are we? (What is our mission, vision, values?)

Where are we? (Not a location on a map, but in the "lifespan" of the organization)

Where are we going (if we continue to do as we have done?)

Where could we go (with a Spirit-inspired vision and a unified board?)

Why are we going "there?" (What is our motivation for growth?)

How long will it take to get there? (Spiritual, human, financial resources needed?)

How will we know when we get there?

What one thing, if we do not attend to this issue soon, *could create serious problems for us in the near future?*

In light of the “Lifespan and stages of a faith community” graph below, *what has changed* significantly in the community surrounding the local church or community you serve to which the board must adjust, and recommend or make appropriate transitions?

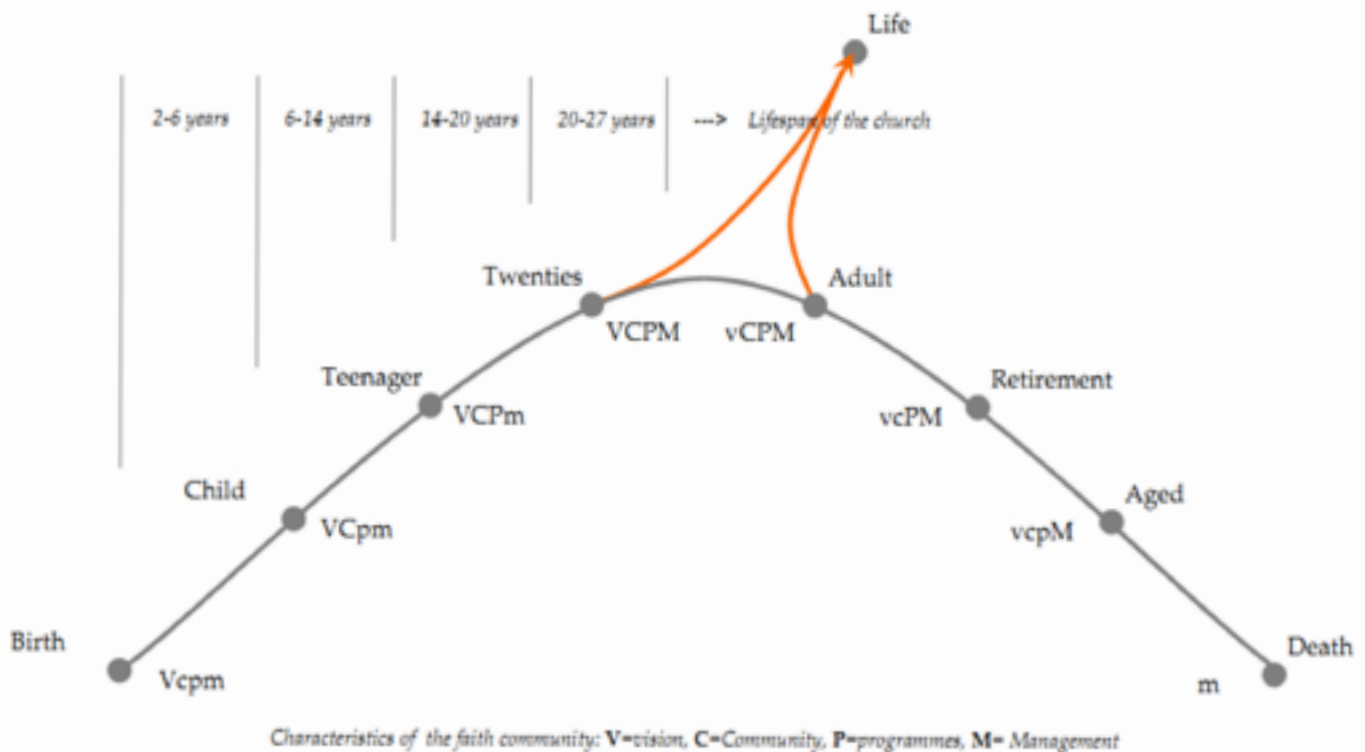
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Which of these questions is most needed to be asked by your board? Why?

# Lifespan and stages of a faith community.



## The Board Agenda!

The above “big questions” can only be asked and thoughtfully discussed if the board agenda has been intentionally developed. Protect the agenda! Significant reports are important. So are the blocks of time needed to discuss the big questions facing the church.



A major component of the board meetings should be designated for "Items for Discussion," and these agenda items can be most clearly addressed if they are placed on the agenda in terms of a well thought-through question(s) to be discussed. "Items for Decision" follow the discussion of big issues, usually in a subsequent board meeting. For sure, there are "items for information." But don't let these items crowd out the significant time needed to pursue strategic questions!

**Characteristic #5. Board members communicate with each others and address conflict situations as Christians.**

*They Watch Their Words*

**Think of it this way: Collisions occur over vision, values, traditions, plans and ...!**

It is inevitable that good, godly and well-intended board members differ and sometimes collide over vision, values, traditions, plans and programs. Embrace the following *convictions* as a board by which you will at times both *lead* and *follow*.

Determine to work through conflict is a way that is fundamentally and qualitatively different from the way dysfunctional boards settle their differences! In conflict situations:

1. Speak Gracefully. Watch the words you speak.
2. Live Gratefully. Don't complain, be grateful.
3. Listen Intently. Seek first to understand.
4. Forgive Freely. Be proactive in extending forgiveness.
5. Plan Decisively. Combine clear vision and deep humility with intense resolve.
6. Care deeply. Value people, not power.
7. Pray Earnestly. Pray for change in yourself even as you pray for change in others.

On which of the above seven convictions is your board the **strongest**?

Which *two* do you feel the board as a whole should focus some quality time in addressing? What *difference* will this change in board behavior make?

- 1.
- 2.

Strong and effective boards do not hesitate to identify the board *values* that will characterize them at their *best* and convict them at their *worst*. They commit to God and to each other a **civility** that in their most intense discussions their behavior will be characterized by:

A magnanimous spirit  
A positive influence  
An inquisitive mind  
A freedom to ask questions  
An acceptance of board decisions  
A servant mentality  
An appreciation for protocol  
A respect for confidentiality  
A reliable word

Where do you **personally** need to give attention? The **board** on which you serve?

**Characteristic #10. Board members participate in assessing the effectiveness of prior decisions.**

**They are freed to *Review/Revise/Redirect/Renew*.**

**Think of it this way: PLAN INTENTIONALLY AND DECISIVELY**

In these and other areas of board responsibility, the board is a vital planning partner with the pastor/leader. Together you move from *vision* to *action* to *results* with clear **vision**, deep **humility**, and intense **resolve**.

Consider using the following planning *template* as you prayerfully and convictionally begin move from vision to action to results.

1. The *Mission* of the ministry organization is: (Mission defines the essence of the organization." It's purpose for existence. It's reason for being.)

2. The *Vision* for the ministry organization is: (Vision defines the "preferred future" for the nonprofit. It is a "see" word. A future orientation. A mental image of the future.)

3. The *Values* of the ministry organization are: (Values define how we intend to operate as we pursue our vision. It clarifies the parameters within which we function as an organization.)

4. The *Context* in which the organization functions, based on of analysis of the organization:

Strengths - internal;

Weaknesses - internal;

Opportunities - external;

Threats - external.

5. Based on the above analysis, the *Priorities* of the organization to which we need give our priority attention are:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

6. In light of these Priorities, the *Strategic Initiatives* for the next three years are:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

7. The Action Plan for **each** Initiative includes:

- 1) Specific, reachable, and measurable Goals:

2) Timeline for accomplishing the each goal:

3) Personnel needed and assigned to each goal:

4) Budget required for each goal:

8. *Desired Outcomes* for each of the above Initiative:

Ponder the following four minute **video** which focuses on a key point in intentional planning.

**Characteristic #11. Board members are outstanding examples of providing financial oversight and giving regularly to the church, college, or organization they serve.**

*They are Role Models of Oversight, Generosity, and Stewardship*

*Think of it this way: They don't raise the money, but insure that it is!*

Board members are in the audience *today* because of their desire to secure the financial resources required to advance the mission of the organization they serve. I salute you!

Boards *take the lead in shaping the strategy* to successfully complete a major gifts fund raising initiative. They provide the *oversight* needed to ensure that a comprehensive *strategy* and implementation *plan* is in place for the organizations to "move from *vision*, to *action*, to *results*."

Donors who give to organizations *expect* the governing board overseeing the financial development to provide the appropriate oversight for the financial affairs and development. Donors *also* expect the board to care enough for the organizational vision to *sacrificially* contribute to the organization!

I encourage boards to carefully consider the NDI's Major Gift's Ramp Up Model to assist the organization you serve in reaching the financial goals needed to accomplish your organization's mission and vision. Mr. LaRose and his counselors equip, assist, and provide the professional expertise needed by nonprofit ministries to raise the major gifts you need!

**In Conclusion...**

On which two "best practices" and "characteristics" of effective boards should the board on which you serve focus during the next two years?

Why these two?

What difference will board development in these areas strengthen the board?

At the beginning of this session on High Performance Boards, the convictional statement was expressed that “**Strong boards empower missional and visionary leaders; strong leaders embrace passionate and engaged boards.**” The above “Lifestyle and Stages...” graph suggests why we need *both* strong pastor/leaders and strong boards. Strong pastor/leaders, working with strong boards have the potential to "break out" of the routine and ordinary to discover *new* approaches to the *new* realities in the community where you are serving.

Strong boards *encourage* passion and engagement by its members, but do not attempt to "micro-manage" the local church or organization. They respect their leaders because, as effective governing boards, they have nominated or elected the very strongest, "mission fit" leaders possible. These leaders have *earned* the trust of their boards and work in cooperation with them.

Likewise, strong leaders “*lead*” by bringing out the *best* in board members, listening to them and providing significant opportunities for them to engage in the decision making process. These leaders are not intimidated by probing questions. They take time to process questions in need of answers; challenges in need of decisions. These leaders model a commitment to communicate with each other and address conflict situations with civility, respect and kindness.

Governing boards will shape the specific questions and answers needed for a particular time and setting. Boards may not have immediate answers to the fiduciary, strategic, or representative challenges before them. They must, however, have the *right* questions and answer the questions in a Christ-like spirit. And, in this process, they increasingly “govern diligently.”

**STRONG BOARDS EMPOWER *MISSIONAL* AND *VISIONARY* PASTORS, and  
STRONG PASTORS EMBRACE *PASSIONATE* AND *ENGAGED* BOARDS.**

**TOGETHER, WE MOVE THE MINISTRY ORGANIZATION WE SERVE**

**FROM *VISION* TO *ACTION* TO *RESULTS*.**

**This is a high performance governing board!**

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