



How to keep a quorum at board meetings

By Barry VanderKelen

From the conversations I've had lately, it seems as if it is becoming more difficult for nonprofit boards of directors to achieve and maintain quorum at meetings.

This trend creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for nonprofit organizations. Boards can't get their work done, which makes them less attractive to potential members. Today's column offers suggestions on how to address this perplexing trend.

Robert's Rules of Order defines a quorum as the number of members that must be present to have a legal meeting. Most organizations have that number defined in their bylaws.

If a quorum is not present, the meeting is technically adjourned, and any action taken in the absence of a quorum is void.

Once a quorum is achieved and the meeting begins, a quorum is broken when the number of members present slips below the required minimum. Difficulty in obtaining quorum may reflect national trends in volunteering. According to the Corporation for National and Community Service — www.cns.gov — the number of people who volunteer is rising, but the number

of hours volunteered per person is dropping.

Furthermore, the tenure of volunteers is shrinking, with an annual turnover rate of more than 30 percent.

In other words, people are having shorter engagements with nonprofit organizations before moving to the next one.

A typical complaint of board members is that they don't feel as though are given meaningful assignments.

This is counterintuitive because the work of the board is vital to the nonprofit group.

Nevertheless, I suspect that organizations which have executive committees have the highest number of board members feeling disenfranchised.

Why? Because the important work is getting done during the executive committee meetings.

This leaves the rest of the board to deal with fundraising. And if someone is raising money, why attend a meaningless meeting?

One thing that a board can do to engage board members more is to make the work of the board more transparent. Allow the full board to discuss policy and bring ideas to the organization.

Everyone on the board knows who the

smart members are and who the posers are. Deference may be given to the smart and the wealthy, and the posers might try to dominate.

This brings to mind the "Rule of 22" for nonprofit boards: Two people won't show up, and two people won't shut up. Creating an environment in which everyone feels welcome to ask focused questions and share thoughtful opinions will make everyone feel connected.

Transparency helps protect against the self-interests of each member.

Achieving a culture of engagement might require the elimination of the executive committee.

There is an additional dynamic involved with volunteer boards: If someone is donating his or her time, does the organization value that donation as much as it values the donation of money?

If board members who are not on the executive committee are asked to only raise money, does that let them feel their expertise is less valuable?

It is important to make each board member feel like an important contributor in his or her own way, and to make the work of the board more transparent.

Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

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The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

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