

NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORKS

Moderator: Michele Higgs
April, 14, 2009
3 pm EDT

Operator: Thank you for standing by and welcome to the Neighborhood Networks conference call.

Today's conference is being recorded.

At this time, I would like to return the conference over to Michele Higgs. Please go ahead.

Michele Higgs: Thank you, John. Welcome everyone to the April Neighborhood Networks conference call. This call is entitled "Building a Board."

I'm Michele Higgs and today I'm joined by Charima Young, Neighborhood Networks' partnership and consortium development manager.

Today, we're going to address the tender topic of developing and working with a board of directors.

Hopefully, as you participate on this call, you will learn about who the members of your board of directors should be, their roles, how you can go about selecting them, how to slow attrition and how to make the best use of your board's skills and expertise.

We will hear from two respected professionals in this field, Rhoda Barr, director of client services with the Volunteer Consulting Group in New York City, and Byron Johnson, project director for CompassPoint Nonprofit Services in the San Francisco Bay area.

However, before we commence with our call, let me welcome our newest centers to the neighborhood with a reminder of the resources they get as Neighborhood Networks Centers.

There are eight new centers this month. They are: the Chestnut Crossing Job and Family Services Center in Coshocton, Ohio; the Walter Neighborhood Networks Center in Lincoln, Nebraska; Cannon Village Neighborhood Networks Center in Shreveport, Louisiana; Stone Vista Neighborhood Networks Center also in Shreveport, Louisiana, Bannock Arms Apartments in Boise, Idaho; Richard Brown House in Loudon, New Hampshire; the Western House in Topsham, Maine; and the Harrisburg Park Opportunity Center in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Welcome to all of these new centers.

Let me tell you about the resources that are available through the Neighborhood Networks Initiative to help you guide your centers to success; speaking of which, I have a newsflash for you.

The date for reserving your room for the Fairmont Hotel for the RTAW in Dallas, Texas has been extended. The new deadline is April 18. That's April 18.

You can find out more about the RTAW by calling the toll-free information line, which is 888-312-2743 or visiting the Neighborhood Networks Web site at www.neighborhoodnetworks.org.

Now, I'm going to tell you a bit about the Strategic Tracking and Reporting Tool known as the START Business Plan.

START is your online resource for organizing your center's activities and tracking the achievement of specific goals. By using it to recognize the needs of your residents and apply the resources in your community to address those needs, your center can grow into a strong resource for your residents and the community.

As center staff completes the START business plan, they can focus on the annual assessment and evaluation to review their progress and commence the center's ascent through the Center Classification process.

Completing the assessment and having it approved by the HUD Neighborhood Networks Coordinator elevates the center to Certified Center Classification and starts the center on the road to Model Center Classification. START is easy to access and easy to update. Just go to the Neighborhood Networks Web site at www.neighborhoodnetworks.org and click on the link for the START Business Plan to the left on the homepage.

Visit the Neighborhood Networks Web site for details on advancing through the Neighborhood Networks Center Classification process or contact the Neighborhood Networks toll-free information line at 888-312-2743 for further information and assistance.

Now, also at the Web site, you'll find out what's current with Neighborhood Networks, learn about funding opportunities, learn about special events, and connect with your peers.

Let me remind listeners that a transcript of this call will be made available on the Neighborhood Network Web site in about two weeks. You can look for it in the conference call archive at the bottom of the homepage.

Remember, if you have questions about the START business plan or other Neighborhood Network topics, you can call the toll-free Neighborhood Networks information line at 888-312-2743.

You can also try online networking through the Neighborhood Networks online message board. There you can share information with other centers or ask questions. Be aware that this is not a real-time source. But when you post your information you can revisit the board in a day or so to see what kinds of responses you've received. Again, go to the Neighborhood Networks homepage and click on the Neighborhood Networks Online Networking link to the right under the green banner labeled "Helpful Tools".

Today's call will familiarize you with the care and feeding of your governing body. Rhoda Barr of the Volunteer Counseling Group works directly with the board and staff leadership of nonprofit organizations, consulting with them on strengthening their governing abilities and managing their organizational evolution.

Her reach has included organizations of all descriptions including art, education, environment, and organizations providing services to youth and the elderly.

Then we'll hear from Byron Johnson of CompassPoint. Byron consults in fund development and other areas of organizational capacity building including fundraising planning, coaching, and donor solicitation training.

He is currently an advisory board member of the Multicultural Alliance, a fellowship program designed to diversify the fundraising profession and develop skills among aspiring fundraising professionals. Together they'll help us take aim at this topic.

Now, Charima would you like to give an overview of today's topic and introduce the first question?

Charima Young: Yes, Michele. Good afternoon everyone. I would like to thank our speakers, Rhoda Barr and Byron Johnson, for participating on our call today.

They will provide you with some very useful information for our consortia board members throughout the country and our centers that are interested in developing a nonprofit board.

The Neighborhood Networks technical assistance staff will work diligently to help Neighborhood Networks consortia develop a solid board of directors for each consortium. Workshops such as board development, board recruitment, and conflict management help consortia members to build and sustain a working board of directors.

Our guests today will elaborate on some of those topics that we will address in these workshops and answer questions that will help you successfully select the right members for your board, maintain your participation on a board, and/or join a board.

Let us start off by asking the first question. I want to ask you, Rhoda, with all of your experience, how would you suggest that our listeners identify and select board members? And, how do you fill any vacancies that you may have?

Rhoda Barr: Well, you have to start with understanding and appreciating the board. At times, I have been asked to do a seminar on "Moving Your Board from Albatross to Asset."

If you think of your board just as people who can give you some money, or that they're just some committed volunteers, you're not going to be starting correctly.

However, if you think of your board as a brain trust, as a very valuable source of knowledge, and you start from that perspective, you're moving in the right direction. Think of them in the same

way that you might if you were writing a job description for an employee. Or think of something much more mundane. If you think of writing a grocery list, you start out with "what is it we need?"

Most boards need people with a variety of expertise, whether it's legal background, financial background, or community understanding. If you were building your board as a brain trust, what areas of knowledge and experience would be valuable?

The point is thinking about the areas of knowledge you need. So you talk about the roles of the board, by sitting down and deciding what it is you need and expect from your board members; and write what we call a board job description. This is a key to looking for somebody. It is the best way of reaching out to potential board members.

You heard a question about filling vacancies. We'll talk a little bit later on about a resource that we've developed. It's a free Web site called www.boardnetusa.org. I will discuss that later.

The first step is to agree on who it is you're looking for to serve on the board. This should not be a one-shot deal. This is should be an ongoing planning exercise with a board development committee that is looking at this issue.

Byron, you want to take the next question?

Michele Higgs: How would you designate the roles of board members? If you decided who it is you want, how do you put them in their proper roles?

Byron Johnson: Well, Rhoda mentioned writing the board job description. That's pretty much where it starts.

In terms of developing the job description for board members, you must determine what it is that you want this brain trust to do. You then want to build on that and start defining the roles of the board members because, believe it or not, there's no "board school."

I mean folks have skills and attributes that we're bringing to the table. However, and I speak as a board member, I'm going to learn about being a board member when I join the board. So it's up to the organization to give me some parameters for that. You can do this by one, putting together a board manual that will include a statement of responsibility.

We like to think that the most effective boards have committees with job descriptions and task forces, things like that.

The common committees are fund-raising committees and board development committees, which is probably the most important committee because we're talking about board development here. Sometimes it's called a nominating committee. Having brief descriptions of each of those committees and their role within the board is important.

Going back to the board job description and the statement of responsibilities, you really want to spell out to board members what is going to be expected of them in terms of committee attendance or board attendance. We get a lot of comments from board members and organizations that, "my board won't fundraise".

If that's going to be the expectation of board members, then it's important to have that noted up front. That way, later on down the line when you're trying to implement things like fundraising, people aren't saying 'well I wasn't expected to do that' or "that wasn't in my job description.' So it's important to have a board description.

Typically, the board responsibility that you're going to encounter, in terms of defining the roles of board members as opposed to staff members, is the board sets the long-term goals of the organization.

So your board members are at the 50,000 foot level. They shouldn't be on the ground doing the day-to-day activities.

You know, the board members are the brain trust that makes sure that the mission of your organization is followed: finalizing budgets, allocating funds, things like that. We call it the fiduciary role of board members; meaning taking responsibility for the company's financial records.

Overall, the board takes responsibility for all the legal matters. So keeping this within the context of the board's service is important. I'm going to stop there because I want to take the next question.

Michele Higgs: Okay. I have another question that fits in-between and that is the importance of the executive director.

When that statement of responsibility or that board manual is developed, who is responsible for putting that together?

Rhoda Barr: The board development committee should essentially be doing that. In reality, the physical printing of it and getting it done may become a staff responsibility. But what's said in it is something that the board has to determine; and as Byron was saying, a way to use the board effectively is through committees.

There is one committee and they used to be called nominating committees, now they're called either board development or governance committees. Those committees develop the manual and the board votes on it. Then the manual is given to any potential board candidate.

Michele Higgs: Okay, that's terrific. That's what I wanted to get to.

Now, the next question is about the executive director. How important is the person who acts as the go-between between the staff and the board and how do you find one?

Byron Johnson: That person is very important because the board is not responsible for the day-to-day activities. The main responsibility of the executive director is carrying out the day-to-day operations of the organization.

Believe it or not, a lot of organizations we work with do not have a job description, or an up-to-date job description, for their executive director. So it's important to do that.

That is the board's responsibility, to make sure that the job description and requirements for the executive director are up-to-date. Because one of the board's key roles is the hiring and firing (if they have to) of the executive director. So it's important that good management and accountability for the executive director is in place.

In terms of how you find an executive director; some boards do it on their own. The executive committee may undertake the search themselves. We don't recommend that. We think it's important to work with an outside group to help you develop a leadership profile for your organization.

For example, what are the skills and attributes and qualities you're looking for in a board member that meets the needs of your organization, as you move forward?

Thinking about the qualities and attributes that will help you identify a board member and what you're going to need in an executive director, where you need to go to find them? Where would that person be now? Are you looking for someone who's up and coming, on the way up in the world? Are you looking for someone who's a seasoned professional? All of this dictates your process for how you go about conducting the search.

Most board members don't even have the time to conduct an exhaustive executive director search. So you're going to need some type of support in doing that. Rhoda, would you like to add anything?

Rhoda Barr: The only thing I would add is the way an organization should function is that the executive director is the one who reports to the board. If the board has a concern, it must communicate it to the executive director. The executive director in turn supervises the staff. Board members shouldn't be going around giving orders to staff members. They may certainly work together, I mean if they're engaged on a project and so forth, but they shouldn't give orders since that's the job of the executive director.

Byron Johnson: That's a good point. That's a really good point.

Michele Higgs: Okay perfect. Now Byron, I'm going to put this question to you. What are the best strategies to implement to avoid attrition of board members?

Byron Johnson: Well a simple strategy is to have term limits and well-defined terms for board members.

Oftentimes, if there are no set term limits for board members, and I'll speak as a board member, I'll ask, well what am I doing here? What are my goals? So I'm kind of adrift. If I have no plan for

service as a board member, the chances of me being disengaged in the life of the board are going to increase.

The other thing you want to do is have compelling agendas and presentations at board meetings and make sure that it's something I look forward to as a board member. I need to look forward to attending meetings; I'm going to learn something. I'm going to grow as a board member. Also, have food. Feed people. Food is a good thing to have at meetings.

Also, hold your meetings at a time that is convenient for everyone. Sometimes you have to periodically canvass your board members about what is the best time for them because that may change. As organizations change, as committees change, the needs of your board are going to change. So if you started out as a really active community-based board where you held meetings during the day and that worked for people, that may not work five or 10 years down the road. So survey folks and find out, because you may have to shift the times of the meetings and how they're structured.

The other thing to keep people involved is a well-defined structure for committees with purposes and tasks so that people have things to do between board meetings. If people aren't engaged in the work of the organization between meetings, they're really not going to pay attention to anything until the meeting.

I was told a long time ago that most board members think of your organization twice a month, on the way to the meetings and on the way from the meetings. You don't want that. You want to make sure that people have some engagement between meetings. That way you can avoid attrition. Rhoda, do you want to add anything?

Rhoda Barr: Well, the next question is almost the same and I would give the same answers. The whole point of it is that you want the organization to be high on the individual's agenda. You can ensure this by making them useful.

One fault that we sometimes observe is that people in organizations reach out to somebody they think will be a terrific board member. They finally get them. They're so glad that they don't want to overwhelm them, so they back away from giving the board member something to do.

Whereas our experience has been that the best thing is to immediately put them on a committee, give them something to do so that this board now becomes an important part of their lives.

I often say that I served on a planning board at my local village. I think I missed one meeting in 15 years because, and that's when I was out of the country, that was an important part of my existence.

Give people something useful to do, give them a reason to be there, and make them feel that they're making a contribution.

Byron Johnson: The only thing I would also add to that is you were probably engaged, Rhoda, because you didn't just do the one thing. People's eyes light up when they hear that I have a fundraising background. They want me to join their board, but I don't want to just go there and be a fundraiser. I want to learn about finance. I want to learn about the program.

So if I have that opportunity, I'm going to be more engaged in the organization. I will check out if you only want me for one thing or one part of my brain.

Rhoda Barr: Let me reinforce that. That's particularly true, I found with financial people, the CPAs. You automatically put them on the finance committee. And as a matter of general policy, I would say I would always put them on the program committee.

Incidentally, talking about committees, it's been my experience when I walk in to help an organization is that's the one committee that's usually missing, the program committee, because the staff thinks they can take care of the program. That is a vital committee, whether you call it program, or program and planning, it deals with the business of what you're all about.

Rhoda Barr: Sometimes it's a good policy to rotate people through committees. It's a good idea to have people serve long enough to get familiar. Putting that accounting person on the program committee gives them a sense of what you're all about.

Byron Johnson: Exactly.

Michele Higgs: Excellent. I'm happy we're having this conversation because I'm certain people are learning a lot about what they should be doing.

Now, I have another question. I think it comes directly from this discussion. Since we're talking about how to avoid attrition, how would you implement a succession plan? You do have to know about growing the board and moving people off and as you say, switching people around.

Byron, I'm going to start with you on that one.

Byron Johnson: Okay. Yes, this is very important, especially for the officers of the board. Make sure that you have a pool of folks and a strategic leadership agenda developed at the board level so that you don't deplete your brain trust and you also grow people through the board to take on leadership roles within the board.

This goes back again to the board development committee. That committee is typically responsible for reviewing and implementing any type of succession planning for the board. This is the back end of the board recruitment piece; this is where you're ensuring that you have the appropriate mix of skills, experience, and expertise on the board.

One of the first things you want the board development committee to do is keep track of the board members' years of service and their engagement, et cetera. They should be able to say, "Okay, so Byron's going to be leaving the board in three years. He's the treasurer, so let's check in with him to see if he's going to be leaving and maybe start grooming someone for the treasurer seat. Who would be the next person in line and what policies and procedures do we have in place?"

Make sure to have that process in place and don't turn a blind eye to the fact that board members are going to leave. One of the most important things for you all to take away from this conversation is that board recruitment and development is an ongoing process. It doesn't just happen when you need board members. You should always have the leadership pipeline open.

So, three things you want to make sure happen through this process are: 1) make sure that current board members have the sufficient experience to expose new folks to competencies they're going to need to become the kind of board members you seek. You're going to do that through training, mentoring, and shadowing people within their roles as leaders of the board.

2) You want people and board members to elevate each other's thinking. Going back to keeping people engaged, which is part of succession planning, is keeping people's minds involved in the life of the organization. Typically in the work that we do through our programs and the services that we provide, we are exposed to a lot of information. I think that we don't expose our board members to that information to their detriment, which leads to attrition of board members.

3) So in terms of what the nominating committee looks at annually regarding the composition of the board and its vulnerabilities and abilities, they also review the service terms of people coming off to make sure that there is continual succession of leadership on the board.

Rhoda Barr: I would also refer you to the earlier discussion, the question of terms and term limits. Those are two different things.

Every organization should have rotating terms. In other words, usually it's a three-year term and one-third of the board's term ends each year. So whether you put a cap on it or permit unlimited election is a policy decision. What is being more and more widely accepted is maybe two or three-year terms and then a year's sabbatical before a person is eligible to return.

You can use that in a situation where you've got somebody who's really terrific but they shouldn't serve on the board forever. Plus, I think the point that Byron made is that sometimes in planning for succession it is not just to fill a gap but to be sure you've got a back up.

Michele Higgs: Now let me ask another quick question because I think somewhere in your description Byron, you mentioned the word "mentoring." I go back to an earlier point that I have here talking about relationship building strategies for board members.

Would you consider that mentoring to be a relationship building strategy?

Rhoda Barr: Well absolutely. In fact, in terms of orienting new members, one of the things we strongly recommend is that each new member has a buddy, a partner, a mentor to help them get acquainted.

I'll talk again about my planning experience. We had an episode dealing with something called Ridge Street. If you are a newcomer and you don't know what they're talking about, you feel like a stranger and you can't follow the conversation.

Then someone who's a designated mentor, partner, buddy, whatever you want to call him, gets together with the new guy before the Ridge Street meeting. He can report what's on the agenda or after the meeting go out for coffee with the new person to give them the background and share, "that's why that guy made such a fuss over it." I think that's very valuable.

Michele Higgs: Okay, sounds good. I'm going to move to another point, which I'm certain folks would be interested in. How would you manage conflicts within a board? You know, there's always going to be something. Rhoda, I'll start with you on that one.

Rhoda Barr: That's a little bit complicated but, can you avoid it? You have people whose personalities just grate against each other; separate them by putting them on different committees. Another way to manage conflicts is in the way the issues are presented. That's a challenge for the executive director or chairman.

I had one of the best chairmen. He always put forth a proposition with at least two options that he could live with to keep the board's discussion focused. He never walks into a meeting and says, "We've got these problems, what do you want to do?" Or "this is what we're going to do, okay?" Otherwise, you get answers all over the place.

Trying to structure the issues as they're presented focuses the conversation in a way that is amenable.

Byron Johnson: I think that in my experience when conflict arises on the board, it is because board members are presented with an issue before they're really ready to deal with it or the issue is not presented properly.

Sometimes it speaks to the lack of leadership on the board. I think it's important to have good leadership and a succession plan in place for your board. With a lot of boards, we see that the board chair is either the person who people most likely respect or the person who said they'll take the job because no one wanted it. It's important to give that person support in managing and facilitating the board meeting.

Even though the person may come to the board with a lot of skills, it's important to nurture those skills so that they can actually effectively lead the board.

With increasing diversity on the board, and that's diversity of all kinds in terms of class, race, and sexual orientation, heightens the likelihood that there's going to be conflict or disagreement when people are so passionate about a cause.

So it's important for the board not to turn a deaf ear to that, but to agree to disagree. So how are they going to disagree? Sometimes boards don't have a system for agreeing. It's important to have a decision-making policy for the board on certain things.

The last thing I'll say is one way of dealing with conflict with board members, you may want to establish a code of conduct for directors, and the board itself would do this. It wouldn't be something for the executive director to say, "This is how we're all going to be." The board would have to set the tone for itself and set standards for its rules and for the relationship between board members.

Rhoda Barr: You know, one other thing is the importance of having terms because you don't want to get in a situation where you're going to vote somebody off the board. If you have terms and you're having a difficult board member, there would be a natural point when that person can be rotated off. Just wait him out.

In some cases that may be the answer; try and neutralize them as much as possible. Then you've got a graceful way. You don't want to get in the position of voting people off, unless they've done something you know is criminal.

Michele Higgs: Okay. You know what I'd like to do now? I am going to ask our operator to see if we have any questions on the line. John, is there anyone on the line with questions?

Operator: Thank you, Ms. Higgs. The question and answer session will be conducted electronically. If you would like to ask a question today, please do so by pressing the star key followed by the digit 1 on your touch-tone telephone. If you are using a speakerphone, please make sure your mute button function is turned off to allow your signal to reach our equipment. Once again, if you'd like to ask a question, please press star 1 on your touch-tone telephone. We'll pause for just a moment to allow everyone an opportunity to signal for questions.

We'll take our first question from Shannon Nappi.

Shannon Nappi: Hi. Are there any free resources for job description samples and things of that nature?

Rhoda Barr: Yes. When you go to www.boardnetusa.org, look for the Resource Center. You'll find examples there. If you don't find what you want, you can reach out to us, I've got lots of samples I can send. You can reach me at the Volunteer Counseling Group, www.vcg.org.

Shannon Nappi: Excellent. Thank you.

Michele Higgs: Great. Thank you, Shannon. John, anyone else?

Operator: As a reminder, it is star 1 if you'd like to ask a question. We'll go ahead and pause a moment.

At this time, there are no further questions. Actually, there is one question that just queued up, from Joyce Mortimer.

Joyce Mortimer: Hello. I missed part of the session. I'd like to know about developing a program committee. How would you structure a program committee for a relatively new Neighborhood Networks center?

Michele Higgs: Would this be for a consortium? I want to be clear on your question, Joyce.

Joyce Mortimer: It's a general question for a Neighborhood Networks center, a new standalone, and also for a consortium for a group of centers. These are newbies to the process. How do they structure that so that they don't compete or clash with the tasks and responsibilities of the center director, the center manager? They have already undertaken the survey of stakeholders in the community and at the center on the property.

Byron Johnson: Do you have the delineated roles of the executive director outlined in terms of what they do for programs?

Joyce Mortimer: Only generally.

Byron Johnson: Okay. I would start there because your issue doesn't seem to be one of conflict. So it's important that you clearly define the roles of the executive director in terms of programming.

Based on that, you can determine how the program committee can fill in the blanks.

Typically, a new program committee will look at or work with the executive director in new

program development, or monitor and assess existing programs or program evaluations. For instance the executive director leads the discussion surrounding strategic planning and how the program helps achieve the organization's strategies.

Rhoda Barr: Now, I think you've touched on something very important. Fundamentally, it is the role of the board, and the program committee as a component of the board, to set the direction for the programs, which are then implemented by the executive director.

But one thing that you've touched on that I'd like to highlight is that there needs to be, probably annually, an agreement on key points of future evaluation between the board and the executive director. At the end of the year, the program committee is looking at what has and has not been accomplished, which reflects the performance of the executive director.

Setting guidelines and guideposts for measuring is a way of ensuring that the organization is proceeding as it should, and that the executive director has a map to follow.

Michele Higgs: Joyce, does that work for you?

Joyce Mortimer: It works very well, thank you.

Michele Higgs: Okay great. Do you have a question?

Monique Caston: Yes.

Michele Higgs: We have another question. This is Monique. She's in the room with us.

Monique Caston: Hello everyone. How are you doing today?

Byron Johnson: Good.

Monique Caston: When working with the center that has a board of directors that are residents of the apartment complex or a community, how should center directors work with them?

So for example, when organizations seek board members they're usually coming from the field or a profession that can bring various resources to the table. In this situation, the board members are residents so they don't necessarily have all of those connections, background, or experience.

How do you go about managing and working with the board of directors and encouraging communication? I don't want to sound discouraging, but trying to make sure that people aren't, for lack of a better term, biting each other's heads off?

Michele Higgs: That leads me to my question here. You've got conflict on the board but also methods of communicating among the board members. Could this be considered more of a resident advisory panel than a board of directors?

Monique Caston: Yes. They're a board of directors. They are not a resident advisory panel. With that, I would also like to know on boardnet, do they have job assistance for resident advisory panel?

Byron Johnson: I don't think so.

Monique Caston: Okay.

Michele Higgs: On this one again, it sounds like it's more of a communications issue.

Byron Johnson: Right, communications and expectations perhaps. I mean, the board of directors is residents. Is it set in your bylaws?

Monique Caston: They have bylaws. They have everything that a board has. They have an executive committee, subcommittees; but working together is a problem. I see a little bit of an issue there.

Byron Johnson: Yes. So if there's a board development committee, its role would be to look at the dynamics of the board and look at where education is needed; what do folks need to be effective board members?

Sometimes that process begins with assessing the board members, surveying the board members, asking them some key questions about how and what they want to learn.

Do they understand the mission of the organization? What things would they like to do better? Would they like to work on being better representatives of the organization?

That way the board members tell you as individuals what they would like to work on.

Rhoda Barr: One thing that is difficult for board members to understand is that they're not representatives of their individual interests, but that they're there to serve the overall good. We find that when people that come from different communities sit on the central board, they often think that they are there as advocates. They are there as governors of this organization. This is part of an educational process.

Michele Higgs: I'm going to move on to another question, which is: What are some effective methods for communicating? And how do you use technology to communicate effectively? We've had that come up before when talking about boards and how they can use technology to communicate.

Rhoda, I'm going to start that one with you.

Rhoda Barr: Well let me say one thing, I think you should use technology to the extent that you use it in a way that suits your community. In other words, does everybody have e-mail and so forth.

The other thing, and I will take a moment to tell you a little antidote, there was a controversy in my immediate family as to when I did or didn't call my mother. We finally decided that I would call her at 9 o'clock every Saturday morning unless something special came up. Then I wouldn't feel guilty that I should have called her on Tuesday and Wednesday and she wouldn't be worried whether she didn't hear from me.

With that experience as background, when working with a chair and an executive director, I witnessed that kind of tension when one board member wasn't calling to report what was happening. This was resolved when they set a time to contact each other and all of the tension went away.

Setting up a schedule of when information is going to go out or when committee chairs will each send out an update report may dissolve the tension in communicating.

Michele Higgs: Okay. That's an easy way. Byron, did you want to have any suggestions on that one?

Byron Johnson: Yes; I would go back to board roles and responsibilities and the board description. If you're using different technology or e-mail or Skype or videoconferencing in board meetings, you'll need to update your bylaws to reflect that you can make decisions that way.

The other thing is you're going to want to update your roles and responsibilities about how board members communicate between meetings.

E-mail can be deadly for how people communicate between meetings. You don't want to discuss or make policy decisions over e-mail between meetings unless that's within the context of the committee work.

Those side discussions can, without much clarity and purpose around them, lead to some, for lack of a better word, ugliness.

Rhoda Barr: I didn't consider it, but that's a very good point.

Michele Higgs: Another point I wanted to get to is what would you consider the most essential tools that a board needs to develop and grow?

Byron Johnson: Well, I think that an effective board development committee is important for all boards to develop and grow. The board development committee, in my mind, holds the heart and the vibe of who the board members are, their experiences, what individual board members bring to the table, and succession planning.

A very big role for that committee is keeping the temperature of the board and where they need to be going as a board and I think that it's a really essential tool. Therefore, in my work with boards, we really try to strengthen the board development committee.

Michele Higgs: Okay great. Thank you. I am going to ask John if we have any questions on the line.

Operator: We do, we have another question from Ronald Milligan.

Michele Higgs: Okay, Dr. Milligan? Hello?

Ronald Milligan: Can you hear me okay?

Michele Higgs: We've got you now.

Ronald Milligan: Regarding the management of conflict; my question is, what would you suggest as the optimal number of board members, to avoid conflict?

Michele Higgs: Okay, Rhoda, what do you think?

Rhoda Barr: Well, I think a little bit depends upon the size of the organization. Usually, I would say somewhere between 9 and 15 people. If you get below nine, it gets too small when people can't come. Again, I don't know the size of the centers or the organizations; if the organization is more established, then I would say you could have between 15 and 21 members. I am very reluctant to see boards get much bigger because they get unmanageable. But if they get too much smaller then you don't get the outreach.

Michele Higgs: All right thank you. Byron, did you want to weigh in on that one?

Byron Johnson: I would agree with everything Rhoda says. I mean, she makes a very good point around managing. So what is the best manageable size for the board? Generally, if you have an executive director, a big part of their job is managing and working with the board. So how many relationships can they manage and can the board manage its own relationships at 15 or 21 people?

Michele Higgs: Okay. Thank you much. John, do we have anyone else on the line?

Operator: We'll take our next question from Mary Frances Byrd.

Michele Higgs: Hello Mary Frances.

Mary Frances Byrd: Hi. How are you doing? Which is better, individual centers having their own board of directors or a board of directors trying to handle programs for a number of centers?

Byron Johnson: So like a board overseeing a group of centers?

Mary Frances Byrd: Correct.

Byron Johnson: Okay.

Michele Higgs: If we were talking about that we'd be talking about a consortium.

Mary Frances Byrd: Correct.

Michele Higgs: More than likely what we would see would be a board of directors working with a consortium.

Mary Frances Byrd: Which is more efficient? Which should be the focus?

Charima Young: Mary Frances, I would like to take that. This is Charima Young. I would say that we've always heard that there's strength in numbers. So yes, while it's very important to try to get resources for your individual center, when centers come together to service the same community, people to want to give to a consortium versus an individual center. Also, it brings more diversity to the table. I think you are able to share different resources and ideas.

We find that consortia that work effectively together are able to network better to develop better partnerships and so forth. Being a part of a consortium is to your greater advantage.

Mary Frances Byrd: Thank you.

Michele Higgs: All right, thanks for your question. John, do we have anyone else on the line?

Operator: We have no further questions.

Michele Higgs: Thanks. I'm going to ask you another question about how you manage your work/life responsibilities with your board duties? Is there ever a crossover?

That would be for Rhoda.

Rhoda Barr: Well, that's how you manage your life in general. People have family and work responsibilities. They may have community responsibilities. The important thing is before taking a board assignment, make sure that you are ready to give it your attention. If you're not prepared to do that then you shouldn't join the board. Everyone has to decide his or her own work and responsibility. The main thing is to make sure that if you do join a board, that you've made a place for it in your schedule.

Michele Higgs: Excellent. Thank you. Now, I also want to ask about the skills that you can take from board membership to apply to your personal life. Byron, I'll start with you on that.

Byron Johnson: Personally, I find that when I'm serving on a board, I'm making decisions about financial, organizational, and policy issues and that I can take those skills anywhere. I'm also managing relationships with people in terms of diversity of thought and opinions. We're making decisions together, which are other skills that I can take anywhere. The other piece is the relationship with the executive director. Assessing and hiring the executive director, is a great skill to have.

Michele Higgs: Great. Rhoda, would you want to weigh in on that one?

Rhoda Barr: The American Express Company did a study about the benefits of their people serving on boards to enhance their executive development. American Express reported that most people either give orders or take orders in their workplace, they only see a slice of the operation.

When you serve on a board, you're able to see the whole picture and to think strategically. You also have to negotiate with the other board members as your equal. You're not their subordinate and you're not their boss, so you also are acquiring negotiating skills and understanding.

The other thing that they found in this study was that you're meeting people from a different perspective, and a different point of view.

Michele Higgs: Well, that's a wonderful point. I'm glad you were able to make that. That's definitely a benefit to being on the board of directors.

I think with that we've come just about to the end of our call. I'm going to close it out by saying thank you to Rhoda and to Byron, and to Charima, Monique, and to our callers who dialed-in.

Let me remind you about the resources that are available to you through the Neighborhood Networks Initiative. You could always call the toll-free Neighborhood Networks information line with questions at 888-312-2743.

You can also find abundant resources and current information on the Neighborhood Networks Web site at www.neighborhoodnetworks.org.

Now, let me remind you the RTAWs are coming April 29 through May 1 in Dallas. You can check the Neighborhood Networks Web site for detailed information, plus there's news.

We learned that the date for reserving your room at the Fairmont Dallas Hotel at the special RTAW rate has been extended to April 18. Let me repeat that. You have a few more days to reserve your room at the Fairmont Dallas Hotel at the special RTAW rate. The deadline has been extended to April 18. Watch your e-mail and the Neighborhood Networks Web site for details.

On May 12, we will tackle the topic of "The Art of Multitasking, Making the Most of Your Time," for those of you trying to figure out how to do 20 things at once rather than your usual 10.

Thanks to all of you for joining us today. Thanks again to Charima Young, Rhoda Barr, Byron Johnson, Joyce Mortimer, and Monique Caston for sharing your wisdom and creating and nurturing governing boards.

Thanks to all of you callers. Take good care everyone. We'll talk to you next time.

Operator: This concludes today's conference call ladies and gentlemen. We appreciate your attendance and have a good day. Thank you.

Michele Higgs: Thank you.

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