



Revitalise Your Community Board

A makeover for community groups that
want to lift their game

**Revitalise Your Community Board:
A makeover for community groups that want to lift their game**

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Introduction

As not-for-profit boards go, you're competent. You get the job done. Under your benign supervision the organisation jogs along from day to day and month to month and year to year without much fuss, and without much change. You're not breaking new ground, and you're not going out backwards. But –

Shouldn't there be more to life? You do seem to spend a lot of time on unimportant items. The mission, somehow, doesn't come up often: either everybody instinctively knows everything about the organisation's vision for the future or it's somehow drifted into the too hard-basket and been covered up with junk mail.

As a board, you're supposed to feel that vision and to be able to communicate it. It's your piercing gaze that's supposed to part the mists of uncertainty and lead the organisation on to the sunlit uplands of successful achievement. And that doesn't really seem to be what the last few meetings were about.

Are you a board at all, in fact, or are you just a group of people sitting around a table? Do you have a common understanding, a common purpose, a common direction? Is your board more than the sum of its parts?

Even a board that has worked well in the past can become run-down or lose its focus. Are you coasting? Your board, you may well decide, needs new energy, new drive, new purpose. The chair can't do it all single-handed. Neither can the CEO. The whole board, as a whole, must lift itself and start looking around.

This book is pilates for your board – a pick-me-up that will leave you more flexible, more nimble, healthier and stronger.

Terminology

The not-for-profit sector has a number of different names for what are functionally much the same thing. Just for ease of reading, we've settled on one common set of terms.

| | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| When we say | "board" | we mean: "board" or "committee of management" or "council" or "executive committee" |
| When we say | "chair" | we mean: "chair" or "chairperson" or "president" |
| When we say | "board director" | we mean: "board director" or "board member" or "committee of management member" or "trustee" |
| When we say | "manager" | we mean: "manager" or "chief executive officer" ("CEO") or "director" or "coordinator" or "executive officer" |
| When we say | "constitution" | we mean: "constitution" or "rules" or "articles of association" |
| When we say | "by-laws" | we mean: "by-laws" or "policies" or "club rules" |
| When we say | "not-for-profit sector" | we mean: "not-for-profit sector" or "non-profit sector" or "community sector" or "third sector" or "voluntary sector" |
| When we say | "not-for-profit organisation" | we mean: "incorporated association" or "company limited by guarantee" or "cooperative" |

How to use this book

This book has four parts. In the first part, we set out what your board ought to look like: what makes for a board that is strong, flexible, resilient, and effective.

The second part enables you to evaluate how close to that ideal your board comes.

The third part steps into the gap between the ideal board, and where your board stands at the moment. It looks at the most common problems boards tend to run into, and helps you to figure out what you need to do to fix them.

In part four, you write down the way forward.

As you read the book, scribble in the margins. Note issues that you want to discuss with your colleagues. Use our ideas to prompt your own conceptions. Translate our examples into your own circumstances. Explore the implications of our principles for your organisation. Identify the areas we've left uncovered. Underline the parts you disagree with.

Don't take anything we say on trust. As with any workout, there's no point just sitting back and watching the coach jumping around – you have to sweat it out yourself.

Part one: The ideal board

The ideal board: membership

If you could appoint anyone you wanted to the board, what kinds of people would you be tapping on the shoulder? Draw up a table. It'll have to be pretty rough – there are many types of boards, and many types of diversity – but it's a good start.

A good board isn't sexist

It's clear from the experience of commercial organisations that there's positive value to having women on boards. Companies that have plenty of women on the board do better than companies that have only one, too.

That's straightforward. The real problem is explaining why, that being the case, so many company directors would rather hang-glide naked into a volcano than consider nominating a woman. Basically, that willed blindness is a guy thing, and it goes far to explaining why those all-male boards go wrong so often.

Even boards that might seem naturally aimed at a male audience – men's health, men's sheds, man dens – might find it useful to have some representation of the people whose support, or at least whose forbearance, is going to be called upon to make this work.

- What's your gender balance?

A good board understands its clients

This doesn't just mean that you know what's in the documentation, and it certainly doesn't just mean you know what everything costs. Understanding the issues means being able to empathise with the feelings of the people you're dealing with – your clients, your stakeholders, your staff, all the people at the pointy end of the organisation where your work is actually done.

It's certainly easier to understand these things if someone on the board is able to prompt you when you start imposing your own presumptions over the views of your audience. If you haven't got any directors who have walked in the shoes of the people you're trying to help, the communities you're trying to reach, then everything can get rather abstract. You can find yourself detached from the feelings and emotions you have to work with. If you're working with people with a disability you can underestimate their abilities and provide them with inadequate resources; if you're working with a sports team you can propose activities that they can't readily afford.

Some constitutions have a provision for special representation of client groups – a clause that says a couple of your members (if it's only one, there's a risk they'll be isolated and uncomfortable) must come from the community you serve, elected by the community or nominated by its representatives. Most constitutions don't mention it, and then you may just have to reach out and try to find someone you can invite to nominate.

- Do you have any representation from the pointy end?

A good board has the necessary skills

A board has many functions – legal compliance, financial management, social marketing – and it's certainly handy if as each of these comes up you can point to the board's resident lawyer, accountant and marketing whiz to fill you in on what's going on. Unfortunately, you're not the first person, or the first board, to have that thought, and the available stock of public-spirited lawyers, accountants and marketers is under considerable pressure.

That being so, you'll probably have to prioritise. What's your most obvious need? You'll have to compromise. How about somebody who studied accounting in year 12? You'll have to be creative.

If you have anybody at all in prospect, you may find it easier to land them if you're able to limit their involvement. If they're not up to a board meeting once a week, they may come at a finance subcommittee once a quarter. If that's too demanding, how about an occasional consultancy? Can you Skype them into the meeting for a single item? Is there any way you can bring their expertise to bear on your problems?

And if you really can't get these skills pro bono in any form, ask yourself if you're going to have to bite the bullet and buy them in at commercial rates.

- Does your board have the necessary expertise?

A good board has the necessary contacts

Board directors represent the organisation to the community and vice versa.

Some boards bring on stakeholder representatives, either ex officio or by special invitation. If you're a rural art gallery, for example, there's something to be said for having a member of the council – perhaps the mayor – to provide a pipeline to one of your main sources of funding. If you're working closely with another agency it may help your coordination if you exchange seats.

More generally, one of the jobs of the board is to represent the interests of the organisation out in the community, and if some at least of your board directors are influential figures in influential circles that can be an advantage.

- Does your board move in the right circles?