



## Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review™

### Raise the Bar: Demand Strategic Thinking and Accountability, Part I

June 02, 2004 -

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Contributed By Terrie Temkin

A number of years ago I clipped a now classic Grantland cartoon. A board chair was bemoaning the quality of his board. He clearly did not understand why it was so hard to find the right members. After all, he reasoned, his board had high standards for board membership -- "No pulse, no board seat!" The closing frame offered up the coup de grace. "Of course we have made exceptions from time to time."

Sadly, I see this scenario playing itself out every day in real life. It's led me to believe that we bring under-performing boards on ourselves. As a consequence I've become quite unsympathetic when I hear people complaining about their board. I believe that each of us has an obligation -- whether we are volunteer or professional leaders -- to raise the bar on leadership standards. It doesn't have to take much effort. Small changes in our own behaviors will result in relatively dramatic changes in board operations, particularly if we stress strategic thinking and accountability.

Probably the most important shift we can make is in our own belief system. We bring under-performing boards on ourselves when we believe that board members can't or won't do the jobs they should be doing. This belief is communicated in many ways -- often subconsciously. We will call board members only sporadically, giving them insufficient information to do their job. We pooh-pooh any ideas they come up with or discourage their questions. We excuse less than adequate jobs with comments such as, "How much can we realistically expect from a volunteer anyway?" Or, we take on the jobs ourselves.

Board members are quick to pick up on these cues. And, because it is easier not to work than to work, especially when there are minimal expectations and often fewer consequences, most people decide to spend their time and energy in other directions. This reinforces the original concept that board members can't or won't do the job, the cycle escalates and we have a textbook example of self-fulfilling prophecy.

I do believe that there is a percentage of those of us in leadership positions that are aware of what we are doing - - at least at some level. However, I would guess that a good share of that number succumbs to what I call the "Diet and Exercise Syndrome." They know what they should be doing differently -- e.g., take the stairs instead of the elevator -- but they continue to practice the self-destructive behavior out of habit or fear of what any change may require of them.

In Part I of this article I will present four general lessons we can learn from Olympic high jump gold medalist Dick Fosbury about what it takes to successfully clear a bar regardless of the degree of challenge to which it is raised. In Part II I will discuss a conditioning regime of "diet and exercise" that enables board members to consistently perform at an exceptional level.

#### **Lesson 1: Turn around negative thought.**

Fosbury was an unlikely champion. In high school he was tall, gangly, un-athletic looking, and only moderately successful at his sport. His coaches there and in college questioned his ability to compete, especially since he had trouble mastering the basic jumping techniques. However, he didn't buy into the negativity around him. When he cleared the bar at 7' 4 1/4" at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico he set a new Olympic record and turned the sport on its ear.

If we are not just mouthing words when we say that board members are trustees for the community -- that they should leave the organization stronger than they found it -- we must raise the bar on what we expect from them. We must believe that strong boards are possible in the real world. This involves censoring our own negative thoughts, monitoring any tendencies we may have to "protect" board members or, worse, to keep them in the dark. This requires consciously providing an atmosphere within which the work can be done, providing any training that may be necessary, and holding board members accountable for achieving clearly defined expectations.

### **Lesson 2: If the status quo isn't bringing results, challenge it!**

Fosbury understood that he couldn't accept the status quo if he hoped to excel at his sport. He exemplified strategic thinking in his challenge of the accepted standard. When he first began at age 16 to experiment, Fosbury was using the classic "scissors" jump. The best he was able to clear was 5 3/4'. At the suggestion of his coaches he tried the Western Roll and the Straddle -- to no avail. So, he broke out of the box. In his words, "as the bar got higher, I started laying out more and pretty soon I was flat on my back." His technique, which was to evolve into the famous Fosbury Flop, didn't look pretty, but it was starting to get the job done.

Every board I talk with today is looking to recruit people of affluence and influence. They are still focused on mastering the scissors jump. While some are quite successful at attracting the "right" names, rarely do I sense that these organizations are satisfied. I would suggest focusing less on money and clout and more on thinking strategically. This means generating a multitude of options for dealing with any problem, then selecting the best one after projecting the most likely reactions to each of the actions and finding "work-arounds" if necessary. Strategic thinkers will figure out how to attract money and clout even if the board is not made up of people of affluence and influence.

One of the most critical factors to influence a board's ability to think strategically is its diversity. Diversity brings different perceptions, new ideas and greater reach. Two under-utilized techniques for ensuring diversity are to recruit people of different ages and different learning/work styles.

While some might argue that life, with its attendant values, changes so quickly that a new generation emerges every five years, there are four distinct generations that are commonly acknowledged in the USA and Canada today. These are the "Matures," those born prior to 1945, the "Baby Boomers," those born 1946 - 1964, the "Gen-X'ers," born 1955 - 1980, and the "Millennials," born after 1980. Each brings to the table different ways of looking at issues based on the defining experiences with which they were raised. Without all four at the table an organization will fail to appeal to the population as a whole, potentially putting its future in jeopardy.

Similarly, to be a success an organization requires a mix of work and learning styles. There are big picture people and detail people. Few ideas will come to fruition without someone concentrating on the minutia. There are also people-oriented individuals and task-oriented individuals. Little is likely to get done if everyone on the board loves to socialize with one another but no one is there to bring the group back to its mission. On the other hand, if the entire focus is always on work, few people will remain committed over the long run because people tend to "do" for other people. To ensure a healthy mix, consider using one of a number of paper and pencil instruments that help assess preferred work/learning styles. Among the more easily administered tools are True Colors, Gregorc Style Delineator, Personality Insights: DISC Model, and Keirsey Temperament Sorter. Besides helping you determine if you have the right balance of personalities to carry out your mission such assessments provide insight into how others operate. That insight can reduce conflict between different personality types.

### **Lesson 3: Compare the organization's vision to where the organization is currently and determine what has to be done to close the gap.**

Fosbury knew he had to increase his personal best. Jumping parallel to the bar wasn't cutting it. Slowly he began adjusting his angle. At a 45 degree angle he was doing better, but it still wasn't good enough. Eventually, he was clearing the bar at a 90 degree angle. It was this technique that was to bring him his personal best and an Olympic record.

Once the desired future has been visualized and it is juxtaposed to a realistic assessment of where the organization currently stands a board can begin to design specific steps to realize its dream. An important consideration in creating a successful action plan is to determine whether the organization can best achieve its vision by taking the steps incrementally like Fosbury or by jumping in headlong and taking them on in a single

dramatic push.

**Lesson 4: Follow the prescribed diet and exercise plan, keep the vision in the forefront at all times, and follow through.**

Fosbury did not just wake up one day, decide to try the high jump, and ask that the bar be set at 7' 4 1/4". He spent years preparing for his historic jump. Any athlete of Olympic caliber understands that success involves commitment, skill, and an ability to visualize success. There must be a commitment to exercise and eating right to keep the body at a peak level of performance. There must also be a commitment to building an exceptional level of skill through practice, practice, and more practice. During their practice sessions athletes are taught to visualize clearing the bar, hitting the ball, or following through on their swing. They quickly begin to appreciate the value of picturing the desired result as they begin achieving their goals.

As organization leaders, if we want to raise the bar for our boards we must become coaches. We must constantly remind our board members -- our "athletes" -- to follow the prescribed diet and exercise routine, to keep the organization's vision at the forefront, and to follow through. Those who lack the commitment or skill should be asked to leave the team.

In Part II of this article I will recommend a diet and exercise routine that will lead to accountable, strategic thinking boards.



## Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review™

### **Raise the Bar: Demand Strategic Thinking and Accountability, Part II: A Diet and Exercise Regime for High Performing Boards**

July 08, 2004 -

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Contributed By Terrie Temkin

*In Part I of this article I presented four lessons that Olympic high jumper Dick Fosbury could teach boards about raising the bar of their service. In Parts II and III I will share a "diet and exercise regime" I have found to work in conditioning board members to clear the bar, regardless of how high we raise it.*

Talk with most people and the words "diet and exercise" cause eyes to shift away in guilt. These are "shoulds" in a culture where 61% of American and 48% of Canadian adults are classified as obese and where the maximum expenditure of effort for four out of ten is changing the television channel with a remote control. For athletes, diet and exercise are "musts." They are what allow them to function at the level of peak performance. If we want our boards to function less as couch potatoes and more as Olympic athletes we need to put them on their own regime of "diet and exercise." This involves keeping them focused on the vision while:

- Making calculated recruitment decisions
- Setting ground rules for those who join the board
- Educating members of boards -- providing them with the tools they need to do their job
- Making decisions based on critical factors
- Delegating work
- Evaluating their decisions and actions
- Holding people accountable for what is and isn't accomplished

This week will be devoted to the exercise portion -- recruitment and ground rules. Next week we'll wrap up this article with a look at "diet."

#### **EXERCISE**

##### **Making calculated recruitment decisions**

People don't make an Olympic team because former Olympians know their name from the community and think they might be good. Instead, they vie for a coveted place by working exceedingly hard for years and proving their winning skills at local, state and national competitions. This is often after a coach spots their potential and invests time and effort in their development.

We must recruit board members in a similar fashion. Rather than trying to sell those we identify as potential board members on the idea of joining our board we should test their skills and levels of interest and commitment, selecting only the best for our team. Putting people on committees and seeing how they produce is one of the most effective tests available because the proof is in the outcomes, or lack thereof.

Well crafted questions will provide good insights as well, as long as one really listens to the responses he or she gets. Some questions that are effective at ascertaining skills, interest and commitment include:

- What do you see bringing to this board that will make you a good board member?
- What do you think is the most important job of a board member and why?
- What information do you like to have before making go/no-go decisions?
- How would you deal with a situation in which... ? (One example might be you heard the treasurer announce an anticipated deficit in excess of \$50,000.)
- How would you respond if you were offered two tickets to a playoff game scheduled for the same night as the annual gala?

Clearly stating the organization's expectations of its board members and determining to what degree the individual is comfortable with committing to meeting those expectations will also tell you whether this is the right person or not.

(For additional ideas on recruiting the right board members see *Nonprofit Boards & Governance Review*, Recruiting Strategic Thinkers, Temkin, October 14, 2003)

### **Setting ground rules for those who join the board**

People generally are adroit at picking up a group's norms. However, left to their own devices they may pick up norms you'd rather they not, such as coming late to meetings. It is our responsibility as leaders to make the organization's expectations clear. This means stating them clearly and frequently. It also means making sure that what we say is consistent with what we telegraph nonverbally and with any consequences we impose.

We can't be afraid to follow through out of fear that we'll lose board members. Ineffective board members do virtually nothing for the organization and have the potential to significantly hurt it. They occupy seats that could be taken by doers. Perhaps even more harmful, they tend to de-motivate others.

Probably the most basic expectation that I've found to help in creating a muscular board -- strategic and accountable -- is that everyone will participate. Participation can be defined in many ways. For some organizations it is sufficient that everyone raises issues, questions assumptions, and clarifies recommendations prior to voting on them. Others may also want to see that responsibilities are delegated fairly, rather than being constantly assigned to the same handful of volunteers or staff.

If I were to offer an exercise routine to enhance participation it would include multiple repetitions of the following:

- Staying focused on issues that are related to the organization's mission and vision.  
Remember the impact of visualization when one is working to clear the bar at a new

level and appoint a mission caller if necessary to pull the group back if it begins to stray.

- Recognizing, though, the benefit of "cross training." Put up a sheet of newsprint at the beginning of the meeting and use it to capture points that are off topic. Then, dedicate some time at each meeting to explore these. Internet darling Google credits much of its success to the requirement that every employee spend 20% of his or her time on projects of personal interest. The founders of Google realized early that while many of the ideas would never lead anywhere, other ideas would become industry standards.
- Agreeing to put forth no goals without action plans and no problems without proposed solutions. Otherwise, it is like exercising without proper form. There will be a lot of wasted effort and one's desired results will never be achieved.
- Keeping all discussion focused on issues, not individuals. There should be no name calling. One of the most effective techniques here is to disassociate all ideas from those who initially proposed them. Once the ideas are out on the table they belong to the board as a whole and the goal is to make them work or demonstrate why they won't.

When we set an expectation that every board member will participate -- an expectation that is critical to a board fulfilling its Duty of Care -- we must make this expectation as easy as possible to achieve. The reality is that today with everyone's busy schedules, it can be difficult for someone to physically make all the board meetings, even when dates are provided a year in advance. Consider using teleconferencing or web conferencing to involve someone who has to go out of town on business, for instance.

I have a personal preference for web conferencing because everyone can follow along on the same copy of a written report, slide, or even web page. They can annotate this copy for all to see and comment on. The board chair can easily control the interaction, ensuring everyone -- but, perhaps, the aggressive board member with a tendency to take over the floor -- has an opportunity to speak to the issues. And, it's even possible to put everyone's pictures up on the screen or use webcams for live broadcasts. This last benefit is ideal for a group that doesn't know each other well. Today there are a number of companies that offer this service for a relatively low cost. Some are even dedicated to the nonprofit market. But do check out your state regulations. Some do not allow one or both of these technologies to be used for board meetings.

Your board should already be demonstrating a noticeable difference if you have made a commitment to these and similar "exercises." Add the "diet" elements I'll present in the next issue of *Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review* and your board will be turning heads around the community.

*Editor's note: This series builds on Terrie's earlier series entitled Recruiting Strategic Thinkers (Sept. 11 - Nov. 6, 2003). Our thanks to Terrie Temkin, Ph.D. for her contribution to Nonprofit Boards & Governance Review.*



## Nonprofit Boards and Governance Review™

### **Raise the Bar: Demand Strategic Thinking and Accountability, Part III: A Diet and Exercise Regime for High Performing Boards**

July 23, 2004 -

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Contributed By Terrie Temkin

#### **Part III: A Diet and Exercise Regime for High Performing Boards**

*In Part I of this article I presented four lessons that Olympic high jumper Dick Fosbury could teach boards about raising the bar of their service. Fosbury is the innovator of the technique that bears his name and is now used by most high jumpers. In Part II I shared an "exercise regime" I have found to work in conditioning board members to clear the bar, regardless of how high we raise it. In this last section I focus on "diet." The five critical aspects of building strategic, results-oriented boards that I'll touch on here are education, decision making, delegation, evaluation and accountability.*

#### **DIET**

Educating boards members – providing them with the tools to do their job

Little is as nourishing as knowledge. If we want to be able to hold our board members to high expectations we must give them the right food to fuel their ability to do their jobs. Some board members will crave the information we provide. Others may think they know it all. Those are often the ones with nutritional deficits.

There are several building blocks on which I recommend creating a healthy diet of knowledge. Board education must be:

- Ongoing and cumulative. There is a tendency to provide three to six hours of training once a year at an annual board retreat and expect miracles. One does not build strong bones by drinking a single glass of milk. It takes years of consuming calcium from many sources. The same is true of board education. There will be benefit if you spend even 10 minutes on board education at every meeting. The benefit will increase if more time is spent and the topics each month build on previous topics.
- Chunked. People learn best if fed information in bite-sized pieces. Trying to cover too much in a single session is self-defeating.
- Relevant to your vision. Despite the fact that meat has vitamins and minerals not found elsewhere it is not appropriate to serve it to a vegetarian. Likewise, the information you feed your board members should reflect the organization's values and help lead them

to fulfilling its vision.

- In line with your organizational strategy. A diet consisting of donuts will not lead to weight loss. If the focus for the year is on membership your board education should focus on community demographics, how to network, or how to run effective membership events rather than on how to establish a charitable remainder trust.
- Capable of demonstrating cause and effect. While the jury may still be out on the Atkins diet we *do* know that it is worthless to provide training just because it is expected or “in” to do so. You are probably addressing this building block properly if, for instance, your board can make better financial decisions after learning how to read a financial statement.
- Mandatory even for the most seasoned board members. Certainly life intervenes and there will be people that will have to miss an occasional training session. However, everyone can learn something from any situation and there is much value in having the entire board hear the same message in the same way at the same time.

The specific information we should feed people fits into a pyramid similar to the famous food pyramid, though with three categories. The categories, along with a few examples of topics that might be covered under each, include:

#### Mission

- Current research related to the organization’s mission
- Consumer stories
- Organizational successes

#### Community

- Pending legislation that could impact the organization
- Community demographics
- Futures forecasting
- Trends in volunteering
- Trends in giving

#### Governance

- Board roles and responsibilities
- How to read financial statements
- Advocacy techniques
- Talking points on issues
- Solicitation techniques
- The change methodology the board uses/intends to use
- Problem solving techniques
- Trends in governance
- Ethics
- Interview techniques
- Conflict management

Making decisions based on critical factors

All too many boards make decisions off the top of their heads. This is not exercising Duty of Care. Nor is it being strategic. Just as the athlete who must maintain a healthy body reads nutrition labels before placing items in the grocery cart we must expect our boards to research the topics on which they will be deciding. This often means examining multiple options rather than blindly accepting the first one, focusing on critical issues – the ratio between proteins and carbs in our analogy – and allowing enough time to thoroughly debate the rationale, ramifications, pros and cons of each option.

When generating options it is often helpful to use a technique that will foster creative thinking. There is no end to these techniques. In fact, there are many books on the market that outline different processes. I'll touch briefly on four of these processes here.

The first requires that the board put itself in different people's shoes and ask what these individuals would do if faced with the same situation. You can use your clients, staff or volunteers. You might also pick famous generals who were known for their ability to think strategically, such as Napoleon, Patton, and Grant.

The "Six Thinking Hats" by Edward De Bono is somewhat similar in that it requires a board look at its options from different perspectives. Here each perspective is represented by a different colored hat. White represents the objective approach – what do the facts indicate? Red reflects emotion – how does this make everyone feel? Black requires that the board take the cautious approach – what are the potential weaknesses here? Yellow encourages an optimistic outlook. Green represents creativity – is there a twist that will make this really fly? And blue warns that whatever plans are put into place must be well thought out and organized.

A board might also employ "stretch tactics" to force the brain to think differently about problems for which viable solutions seem always just out of reach. For example, a theater company that is having trouble selling tickets might approach the issue backwards – that is, rather than focusing on what is keeping the company from filling the house, picturing the house totally full and assessing the strengths that brought the company to this imagined place. Additional insights could also be gained by adding or subtracting elements from the accepted mix – our theater company looks at what would happen if it suspended its children's theater camp or added a fantasy camp for adults that always wanted to give the theater a try. Any element can be used in this way, such as numbers, demographics, territory, type of service, etc.

Finally, if the problem facing your board doesn't require or can't be solved by an immediate solution you might use an "idea board." This is merely a large piece of newsprint that is posted on a wall of the boardroom and left up over time to stimulate piggyback thinking. People are invited to add any thoughts they have as the ideas come to them. A twist on this process is to have pads of post-it notes readily available. As ideas are jotted down they can be put up on the wall for all to see and react to. This technique is excellent for dealing with complex issues such as board recruitment, fund raising or increasing the organization's visibility.

Whatever problem solving techniques a board adopts it still must measure potential solutions against some sort of decision tree. While there are many decision models from which to choose, at the least the board should consider the ramifications of pursuing or not pursuing a favored option and ask whether that option is consistent with the organization's vision and

values.

### Delegating work

Regardless of how well one eats it is often difficult to get all the vitamins and minerals necessary to keeping one's body in tip top shape. Therefore, athletes often turn to supplements.

As leaders we cannot, nor should we, do everything. We must supplement our skills and energy with that of others. Delegation is the most effective means of doing this. However, just like with vitamins, where the average person is often afraid of the consequences of making bad choices when faced with the overwhelming number of bottles available on the drugstore shelf, leaders are often afraid that the job won't get done, or won't get done well, and that this will come back to haunt them. Doing nothing, however – whether this means forgoing supplements or failing to delegate – can be worse than making a mistake. In the case of boards, failing to delegate reinforces the belief that board members are incompetent. As I indicated in Part I, the power of self-fulfilling prophecy will soon make this so.

We can relieve some of our anxiety about delegation when we realize that the organization's health is dependent on preparing for leadership succession and that we can do some things to lessen the number of potential mistakes. The first thing is to expect that there will be a learning curve. Someone let us make the mistakes from which *we* learned! Second, we can't expect to turn over a large assignment and just walk away. We should always begin by breaking up assignments into small tasks, defining the outcomes we expect, and asking our "delegates" to explain how they intend to obtain these outcomes. While no two people will approach a task in the same way, this last point will give some assurance that the individual understands the task, has a sensible game plan and is capable of achieving the desired results. Training needs will become evident before the fact, at the time when it's easiest to meet those needs. Once we've assured ourselves that the parts of the whole have been mastered we'll be more comfortable turning over entire projects. The last and perhaps most important element is to hold people accountable for doing the jobs they have been assigned.

### Evaluating the board's decisions and actions

In Part I of this article I talked a great deal about Dick Fosbury who took home the gold at the 1968 Olympics and changed the way everyone has approached the high jump since then. Fosbury faced a lot of nay-sayers. His college coach tried to get him to go back to the straddle jump. The US Olympic coach Payton Jordan came out with the statement, "Kids imitate champions. If they try to imitate Fosbury, he'll wipe out an entire generation of high jumpers because they'll all have broken necks." And the judges in Mexico City wanted to disqualify him for his technique, but couldn't justify it when they went to the rule book. In the final analysis Fosbury's odd looking "flop" worked. We must expect our boards to evaluate their plans of action to determine whether they are working or not and why. We must also expect them to tweak those plans if necessary, like Fosbury continuously increasing his angle until he was flat on his back.

### Holding board members accountable

Also in Part I of this article I indicated that often we bring the problem of less than stellar boards on ourselves. The process of evaluation should be extended to our board members.

Some boards today are spending time at the end of every meeting asking people to share what they've personally done to further the organization's mission. (Some groups ask their board members to focus on the time in between board meetings. Others focus on what they have accomplished during the course of the meetings.)

When it becomes evident that a "people problem" exists we have to examine whether the failures we are observing are a result of a breakdown in "will" or "skill." Did the individuals responsible fail to live up to the organization's expectations because they simply didn't follow through or because they didn't know how to follow through? If it is a skill problem we have a responsibility to provide the necessary training. But, because we have an equal obligation to hold people accountable for meeting the organization's expectations, if it is a will problem we have to mete out whatever consequences were previously defined. Ultimately, this may involve asking board members to resign.

I believe it is time to decide that as leaders in the field we are intent on raising the bar for our boards. I know it is possible to get at least a large number of boards to adopt this strategic thinking/accountability version of the Fosbury Flop. In the words of an unknown sage, "People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it."

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