

IN THE

*Trenches*TM

YOU and Your Nonprofit Board

Advice and Practical Tips from the Field's Top
Practitioners, Researchers, and Provocateurs

Edited by:

Terrie Temkin, PhD

The first governance book of its kind to:

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- Challenge dogma about the board versus chief executive roles
- Let YOU decide if you still agree with the old thinking on governance
- Take aim at myths about governance that hold organizations back
- Provide practical, in-the-trenches advice and tips you can use NOW

You and Your Nonprofit Board: Advice and Practical Tips from the Field's Top Practitioners, Researchers, and Provocateurs

One of the **In the Trenches™** series

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Yes, Your Board Can Be Strategic Without Staff!

By Jane Garthson

Do you sit on a “working board,” where directors handle the operational tasks that would be done by staff if only there were staff to handle them? Does the lack of staff justify focusing your board agendas on rehashing and reviewing the work of operational committees and individual volunteers? More importantly, do you feel you can’t possibly give any more time—especially for luxuries like strategic planning, community engagement, proactive board recruitment, financial oversight, or risk management?

I hate to break it to you, but even in your “staffless” situation, the primary role of a board is still to govern. What if I told you though, that you do not need to give more time in order to govern? That you can be more productive in your existing time together by following a few simple steps? Read on!

The Highest Potential of an All-Volunteer Group

In my mind, a volunteer-led nonprofit—just like a staffed one—should serve its mission well and make great progress toward its vision. That means, just as with any other nonprofit, using the resources it does have wisely, so as to achieve the desired outcomes.

Some people assume that every all-volunteer organization is operating in a temporary state while it searches for funds to hire *real* staff. Some are. But most of the ones I know are emphatically *not* looking to hire. Many organizations have missions they feel are best served by volunteers. Their leaders have no intention of growing the nonprofit to the point where it would be large enough for staff. They need more money, but not that much more. A staffed organization would change the very nature and culture of the organization into something unrecognizable and unwelcome.

I sit on three all-volunteer boards. One hopes to grow to the point of having staff someday, but it’s not high on the priority list. A fee-for-service association management person fills the staffing needs just fine for now. The other two have financial wish lists that don’t even have staff on them, because they have no intention of hiring—ever.

But perhaps your organization does have high hopes of hiring soon. The advice below is still valid, and will help make the transition easier.

Five Ways All-Volunteer Organizations Can Become More Strategic

Visioning

Do some board members have trouble describing their ideal world? Then help them envision a highly *undesirable* future. Remind them that it might well come to fruition if the organization does

not identify, plan for, and work toward a better one. This can really motivate board members to become more strategic. If they define the world they *are* trying to construct, they will want to plan to make it happen, dedicating what resources they have to that end.

Delegating Well

Give operational authority, within budget, to committees. A two-page terms of reference document (see below) is invaluable for making everyone feel comfortable with the process. Directors can avoid worrying that they must constantly see the details of the committees' work. Committee results can be monitored and members held accountable without endlessly revisiting trivial items. One group I joined discussed T-shirts for event volunteers at every organizing meeting, instead of letting the event committee make the decision. Sigh.

One of my organizations runs a small, highly participatory, international music festival that places a very high value on friendship and support, not just on performance excellence. We want to make music with each other in circles, and our events include lots of hugging. However, music can now be made alone in home studios with relatively low-cost software and equipment; and, a tremendous amount of music is available free on the Internet for solitary listening. Fear of losing our in-person music community made directors who thought they'd never do strategic planning suddenly want to. Not only have they kept up the planning, they find many decisions easier since having a plan.

Example

Agenda Control

Rigorously monitor the board agenda to keep operational items off it! A Canadian colleague, Brenda Zimmerman, termed the inappropriate trivial items "menus and venues." I used to refer to them as "napkin colors and kitchen supplies," but I like her phrase better. If an operational item *is* coming to the board table, clarify on the agenda exactly why. Does a committee need a budget increase? Does the workshop task force seek the board's approval in principle for the theme of next year's series? Is a committee considering a sponsorship that doesn't fit the sponsorship policy? Be specific so you can stick to the fiduciary or policy issues. Never allow an agenda item of "committee reports."

Non-Board Volunteers

Part of the reason that board members don't have time to be strategic is that they try to do everything. Stop! Recruit non-board members to handle operations, so that the board members have more time to govern. Recognize and support those individuals that step up to lead the volunteer recruitment and retention efforts for your committees. Ask every operational committee to have at least two non-board members, which not only spreads the work around, but also builds board leadership for the future. You might also have non-board members join board members as cochair of your board committees, to get them involved in governance issues. Since these

individuals aren't at the board meeting, it becomes less appropriate to discuss the operational issues there.

A Governance Champion

Even the smallest organization can find someone with passion for their cause whose experience in other organizations helps them understand the importance of key governance activities, like following bylaws and having financial statements and reports. Build that person's knowledge-base by encouraging participation in the free or almost free local training offered in most cities—e.g., lunch and learn sessions through community foundations or universities. As issues arise, suggest this champion seek information and answers by turning to the wealth of free resources on the Internet, including great forums and groups. Find at least one other board member to work with your governance champion on preparing for annual general meetings and the like. That person might then want to learn more too.

Making These Conditions Come True

Well, you can see I'm referring to policies and budgets and terms of reference. Such governance documents free up board time for what matters, but they take time to put in place and maintain. All-volunteer organizations have to carefully choose which policies and plans to spend time on, since there's rarely time to compile a whole policy manual when the group is so busy doing other things. A fairly complete policy manual may come together after enough years, provided the board secretaries have been careful to keep a set of policy approvals separate from the minutes, where they can be found and organized by topic not date. At the start, be very selective about where you spend your limited time. I have found three document types to be particularly valuable:

Candidate Recruitment Information

Let people know up-front what will be expected of them as directors, including key governance responsibilities, meeting attendance, committee participation, annual donations if applicable, and more. I find a job description and a backgrounder that gives an overview of the organization and governance status—three to four pages in total—helps ensure that new directors realize they have joined to govern. They become effective much more quickly. Of course such documents should be supplemented by an orientation process for those who are successful in being elected or appointed.

Committee Terms of Reference/Officer Job Descriptions

These are incredibly helpful for people taking on the different roles, since the individuals do not have to guess at expectations or reinvent the wheel. And the board can relax once officers and committees show evidence that they will carry out their responsibilities conscientiously. The board can then focus on oversight rather than hands-on involvement.

Annual Budget

A budget is an essential part of ensuring that you not only operate within the organization's resources, but also that the funds are allocated strategically—used for the board's top priorities. Directors then know what's available for the projects or programs they are working on and can plan more appropriately. The education committee doesn't suddenly discover that the monies allocated for community sessions have been spent by the publicity committee, or whatever. Directors can also explain to potential donors and other supporters exactly how the monies are used for community benefit.

If you are working from another organization's documents, *adapt them*. Don't just change the organization name! You could find some nasty surprises.

**watch
out!**

Preparing these types of documents is a great investment, and you might save some time if a board member has good samples or templates from a similar organization.

Barriers to be Overcome

Inevitably, boards will slip back into operational mode at times. Perhaps the big event is approaching, a committee didn't do its job, or a major new operational task has come up that wasn't part of any committee or officer mandate. Accept that and get back to being strategic as soon as you reasonably can. It's a detour, not a failure. When you review the progress on your strategic plan or discuss an update to it, talk about how you can avoid having that type of operational work come back to the board table in the future.

A working board still gets to choose which work it will do, and which it will delegate. Operational work can be delegated. Strategic work, such as setting priorities and articulating values, cannot be.

If the board doesn't make time for governance and strategy, a great many good-hearted, hard-working volunteers will waste some of their time and effort on conflicting priorities or less critical tasks. The more limited your resources, the more important it is that you use them wisely.

IN THE
Trenches[™]

The best minds in the field reexamine governance!

Don't read this book unless you are prepared to rethink everything you thought you knew about governance.

Seldom have I seen a more thorough publication and with such well-respected authors. The book covers the critical basics and brings in the state of the art. It's well organized to be a reference manual for all of us in nonprofits.

Carter McNamara, MBA, PhD,
Authenticity Consulting LLC

By guiding a star-studded cast of collaborators into a smart book plan, Terrie Temkin has created a board volume that delivers the dearly bought wisdom of the nation's leading practitioners in ready bites of insight. Read these in short blasts, and you've absorbed centuries of wisdom. This book is a must for board geeks, board members, and top leadership.

Vince Hyman, President, Vincent Hyman
Editorial Services

After reading this book, you might want to carry it with you at all times. That's because you'll find yourself constantly turning to it to better deal

with the often wild and crazy world of nonprofit governance—especially in terms of rethinking board membership makeup and board/staff roles distinction. Wish I had had this tool a long time ago.

Roni D. Posner, EdD, Founding Executive
Director, Alliance for Nonprofit Management

YOU and Your Nonprofit Board reads like a conversation among friends, if all your friends are brilliant and brimming with stimulating ideas. Even we veteran board leaders will learn a thing or two (or thirty) from this collection of thoughtful essays.

Dennis Edwards, Chair, New World School of the Arts Foundation Board; Vice President, Thomas Armour Youth Ballet

You'll know an **In the Trenches** book not just by its cover, but by the author's fun, upbeat writing style. But don't be fooled by its down-to-earth approach and ample use of sidebars. **In the Trenches** books are authoritative and cover what a beginner should know to get started and progress rapidly, and what a more experienced nonprofit-sector practitioner needs to move forward in the subject.

Terrie Temkin, PhD, is widely considered by her peers to be a preeminent thought leader in the field of governance. She is a founding principal of the international consulting firm CoreStrategies for Nonprofits Inc. and is a cocreator of the new governance framework, Community-Engagement Governance[™], discussed in this book. A prolific writer, Terrie's work can be found throughout the world in books, journals, blogs, and her popular column, "On Nonprofits." Terrie also teaches nonprofit governance at Florida Atlantic University.

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