



Resource: **Sustainability Strategies**

The Role of the Board: A Case Study on Mentors, Inc.

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The health and sustainability of a social-profit organization requires all aspects of the organization to be strong and acting in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities. Sustainability is a complex issue involving many aspects of an organization's overall management: planning, finance, fundraising, human resource, partnership building, etc. For our purposes, we are going to look at one aspect of the sustainability puzzle by focusing on your board of directors as an asset that needs attention and protection to do its important job. Board members play a critical role in many of these key functional areas. You want them to feel connected so that you can benefit from the time, talent, and treasure they have to offer.

It has been said that a great board is a victory, not a gift. It requires a tremendous amount of time, energy, hard work, and commitment to develop and maintain a strong board of directors. It is not easy, but I can promise you that the rewards are well worth it.

Since so much has been written about board development, I hesitate to undertake an effort that attempts to reinvent the wheel. Therefore, it is simply my goal to offer a few essential tools to help you as you work to involve your board members in sustainability planning. My hope is that by introducing you to real-world examples from a program that is getting high-impact results, we will create a launching pad that will help your board embrace the roles and responsibilities that are critical to your organization's overall success.

MENTORS, INC.: A MODEL FOR BOARD SUCCESS

Mentors, Inc. is an 18-year-old program promoting the personal, academic, and career development of young adults enrolled in the District of Columbia's public high schools. The organization creates and manages one-on-one mentoring relationships and enrichment activities between adult volunteers and District of Columbia public high school students in order to promote their academic, career, and personal development.

The highly successful program annually achieves 90%+ high school graduation rates among their student protégés (mentees) compared with a citywide graduation rate of approximately 50 percent. Eight out of ten graduates of the program go on to college and this past year the organization awarded more than \$41,000 in scholarships to mentee graduates—almost all of those funds raised by board members!

In assessing the organization's performance and impressive track record, it becomes clear that many aspects of the program are working well. In this brief case study, we want to look specifically at the role the board plays in sustaining the organization.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Strong Boards Are No Accident

Mentors, Inc. serves about 200 students annually (more than 4,000 since its inception) and is seen as a valuable piece of the fabric of the District of Columbia's education and youth-serving communities. Much of its recent success is directly tied to deliberate and strategic investments in building an active and engaged board of directors.

Mona Sanders has been the organization's executive director for 1½ years and truly respects and appreciates the commitment and dedication of her board members. "We have a board that is passionate about our work and has the muscle to move the organization forward," Sanders said.

She believes that the most important responsibilities of a social-profit board include: exercising appropriate governance; strengthening the organization by developing necessary resources and improving visibility; and actively working within the networks of individual board members to create relationships with others who can support the organization with time, talent, and treasure.

Passionate Board Members Make Strong Board Members

When asked about the importance of having board members who are passionate about serving Mentors, Inc., Sanders is quick to point out that it is critical to recruit board members who have "a visceral connection to the organization." In fact, a recent study looking at the effectiveness of social-profit boards finds that board members who are motivated by an emotional attachment to their organizations are more likely to make larger financial contributions, donate more hours to the organization, have better attendance at meetings, and serve on more committees.

This research suggests that making time for board members to talk with each other about what attracted them to the organization, how the work enriches their lives, and how they can personally contribute to the organization's success and sustainability, really do make for better board members.

Sanders agrees. "Our board members want to know who each other is and why others are there. It conveys a sense of humanity," she said. It also supports greater accountability when board members know that their personal participation is essential in order for the organization to survive and thrive.

Emphasize Relationship Building Between Board and Staff Leadership

Mentors, Inc. has also paid particular attention to developing a strong and dynamic partnership between its board chair and its executive director. This is a critical relationship in any social profit organization that must be healthy if sustainability is going to be achieved.

"The board chair translates and communicates the organization's vision to the community," Sanders said. "It is essential that [each board member and in particular] the board chair be a good thinker, be organized, dynamic, and committed to the vision," Sanders added.

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Basic Assumptions Lead to More Promising Practices

Mentors, Inc. is also employing a few other key strategies which I consider essential ingredients of strong social-profit management. For example, they require all board members to invest financially in the organization and they work with each member to determine the appropriate level. Mentors, Inc. recognizes that leveraging critical community resources begins with 100% board giving.

Mentors, Inc. also requires board members to read and sign a job description in the form of a board contract (they call this their “Board Covenant”) so as to ensure uniformity of understanding as to roles and responsibilities.

Finally, according to Sanders, the board acts deliberately to assess their own needs and employs a multi-step process for recruitment—which includes skills mapping, applications, personal interviews, and candid conversations about expectations—all prior to bringing on new members. They act deliberately to assess and then fill gaps in skill sets, experience, and demographic representation.

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Making It Work for Your Program

As you can see, the role of your board in sustainability planning is critical. The strategies are not particularly onerous, but they do require focused attention and a commitment of time and financial resources. In this last section, I want to provide you with a framework for understanding the key roles of your board of directors as distinctly different from the work of your staff. Strong social-profits, like Mentors, Inc., work hard to differentiate and clearly articulate the boundaries, authority, role(s), and tasks (BART) within each group of people.

Use the following checklist to begin the important conversations necessary for sustaining the critical, life-changing work of your program. In fact, I would recommend using this as the basis for a board contract, if you don't use one currently; or spend a few minutes at each gathering of your board discussing in depth one or two of the following roles. In a few months, your board will have a much clearer understanding of what is expected of them and the organization will be that much closer to a sustainable future.

The Top 10 Responsibilities of a Social-Profit Board

1. Determine the organization's mission, vision, strategic goals, and values

It is your board's job to define these elements, refine or redefine them when necessary, and ultimately ensure that they are guiding the work of your organization.

2. Select the chief executive (executive director)

One of the most important responsibilities of any social-profit board is the selection of the chief executive, known in many organizations as the executive director. The selection of the chief executive requires careful consideration of a variety of factors and should follow a well-developed and agreed-upon selection framework.

3. Support the chief executive and assess his or her performance

The board's responsibilities with the chief executive only begin with that person's selection and hiring. It is incumbent upon the board, especially the board chair/president to provide ongoing support to the person in this role.

4. Ensure that effective organizational planning takes place

Strategic planning requires a tremendous amount of work and it involves everyone in the organization at particular points. It is the board's job to determine and manage that process.

5. Ensure that there are adequate organizational resources

Another of the essential elements of an effective board is its ability to contribute time, talent, and treasure—especially treasure! It is absolutely necessary for every board member to be a financial investor in your organization.

6. Ensure that organizational resources are managed effectively

Hand in hand with raising money and securing resources is paying attention to how those resources are managed. Here again, this is the job of many people, but it is the board that must assume final authority and ultimate responsibility. The board is the fiduciary authority for the organization and they are responsible collectively and even individually for the financial actions of the organization.

7. Monitor programs in relation to mission, vision, strategic goals, and values

The board should know about the organization's programs, where it is soliciting funds, and how the work aligns with the board's priorities.

8. Enhance the organization's public standing

It is always important for social-profit organizations to carefully manage their public image. Our ability to build interest in our work is often tied to how well known we are in our communities. Board members can and must play a central role in introducing the organization to their friends, family, colleagues, and associates. They must act as ambassadors, even missionaries, for your great work whenever and wherever they can.

9. Maintain accountability and ensure legal and ethical integrity

As the board is the fiduciary authority when it comes to finances, so too is it the organization's legal authority, contract agent, and responsible party. It is the board's job to ensure that the organization operates in accordance with local, state, and federal laws at all times. Boards are also responsible for making sure that the organization makes ethical decisions that are consistent with its mission, vision, and values.

10. Recruit and orient new members and assess overall board performance

Given their myriad roles and responsibilities, it is critical for board members to find ways to hold themselves accountable to the organization, themselves, and each other. Boards should also articulate a clear process for recruitment, nomination, and selection. It is a year-round process and it is essential when planning for sustainability.

This information should give you a great starting point for improving your board's role in sustainability planning. You are sufficiently prepared to start cultivating a board of passionate and committed individuals. Now it's time to identify a place to begin and get moving. It really doesn't matter what you choose as your first step, only that you choose one!

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Additional Resources

- “Sustainability Planning and Resource Development for Youth Mentoring Programs” takes a comprehensive look at how youth mentoring programs can plan for their future. Specific chapters cover effective planning strategies, corporate giving, approaching foundations, government grants, individual giving, local events, the ethics of fundraising, and board involvement, among others. On the web at: <http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/pdf/sustainability.pdf>
- BoardSource is a tremendous resource for staff and board members of social-profit organizations. They offer publications, training, technical assistance, consulting, and many other useful resources. On the Web at: <http://www.boardsource.org/>
- BoardnetUSA is a unique website dedicated to the express purpose of connecting social-profit boards with new leaders. On the web at: <http://www.boardnetusa.org>

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