

Why Board Engagement in Advocacy is Essential

by Anne Wallestad, as printed in the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, July 2015

We ask a lot of nonprofit boards of directors. We want them to be deep thinkers about strategy and mission, vigilant providers of oversight, rainmaking fundraisers for our work...the list goes on.

But where some have called for a narrowing of the board's scope, today BoardSource did the exact opposite. With the release of a new edition of *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards*, we have formalized the expectation that advocacy is an essential board responsibility.

This is not something that we take lightly. "Ten Basics" is widely considered to be the definitive resource on nonprofit board roles and responsibilities, and has sold more than 300,000 copies worldwide since it was first released in 1988. Expanding the expectations for boards around advocacy in this seminal publication is putting a stake in the ground. We are saying that advocacy is too important to the success of our missions to be considered something "extra" or "nice to do." It's absolutely essential to the work of our organizations and our ability to fulfill our missions and serve our communities.

Here's why we are taking this important stand:

- **Our missions are too important to sit on the sidelines.** If there are policy changes that would advance—or threaten—our ability to do our work, we can't afford to sit idle as the decision-making happens around us. We need to make sure that policymakers understand the impact of their decisions on our missions and our communities. We need to make sure that they know exactly what our communities have to gain—or lose—from those decisions; it's our responsibility as protectors of our missions.
- **The need is too great to ignore.** While it's not all about public funding for nonprofit organizations, we cannot be naive about the fact that nonprofit organizations are extremely vulnerable to shifts in public funding priorities. With a third of all revenues received by public charities coming from government sources, there's no denying that a huge portion of the programs and services that we provide to our communities depend on public support. And when that support shrinks, goes away, or is delayed, the people that we serve suffer. That's not a fundraising problem for our organizations; that's a survival problem for our communities' most vulnerable. We have to make sure that policymakers understand the impact of their decisions before the damage is already done.
- **We are the people decision-makers need to hear from.** Policymakers are hungry for information and education from community leaders and constituents, and board members' motivations and intentions are perceived differently than those of paid lobbyists or even nonprofit staff. When an unpaid volunteer board leader takes that time to speak with them about an issue of community importance, they pay attention.
- **We have more power and influence than we think.** There are an estimated 20 million board members in the United States alone, and we represent our communities' most connected and influential leaders. When the stakes are high, these relationships and networks matter, and we have the power to partner with decision-makers to align priorities with what our communities really need.

Board leaders are a powerful and influential group of leaders committed to the missions and organizations we serve. To leverage the positive potential of our leadership, we have to expand it outside of the boardroom. We have to communicate with passion and clarity about why our work matters to those who are making decisions that will impact our missions.

If we care enough to sit on a board, then we must care enough to stand up for our missions. In some circumstances, it's the only thing that will really make a difference.

Ten Basic Responsibilities: Highlights from the New Edition

To clearly communicate the expectation of board engagement in advocacy, BoardSource discussed the importance of advocacy and ambassadorship throughout the ten roles and responsibilities discussed in the book. The most substantive changes include:

Chapter/Responsibility 1: Determine Mission and Purposes, and Advocate for Them

This chapter focuses on the role that the board plays in defining the fundamental purpose and mission of the organization. Previously, it was entitled "Determine Mission & Purposes." The addition of advocacy in the title reinforces the fact that board members are not just responsible for setting the mission; they are responsible for actively working on its behalf. This chapter sets the tone that board responsibilities go beyond the internal work of the board, and require a public role.

- *"Boards and their members should be conscientious ambassadors and advocate for their organizations. They should 'stand for their mission' (www.standforyourmission.org) by communicating and connecting with community leaders and others who are in positions to make decisions that could positively – or negatively – impact their organization's work."*
- *"Often, what board members do between meetings – such as advocate – matters as much as what is accomplished in regularly scheduled meetings."*

Chapter/Responsibility 6: Ensure Adequate Financial Resources

This chapter summarizes the role that board members play in ensuring that the organization has the resources it needs to sustain its mission through a combination of responsible management of expenses and adequate and sustainable revenues. In describing the types of revenue that an organization might solicit and secure, the chapter previously focused exclusively on earned and contributed revenue, but now includes a section focused on public/government support, which mentions the role that board members play in educating policymakers about the need for – and impact of – those dollars through advocacy.

- *"According to recent data from the Urban Institute, a third of all revenues received by public charities in the nation come from government sources, whether in the form of grants (8.3%) or fees-for-services provided (23.9%)."*
- *"[T]here is a need to actively engage with policy-makers to ensure that they understand the impact of your organization's work and public support of it. This means accepting the board responsibility of actively, consistently, intelligently, and strategically advocating for the organization's mission."*

Chapter/Responsibility 10: Enhance the Organization's Public Standing

This chapter outlines the external role that board members play in building and supporting their organization's reputation and reach with key constituents and the general public. In its previous edition, this included mention of ambassadorship and advocacy, but focused solely on engaging with the media. The new edition begins with a section on advocating for your mission and the unique and important role that board members play in accelerating the advocacy efforts of their organizations.

- *"Board members serve as a link between the organization and its members, stakeholders, constituents, or clients. They should think of themselves as the organization's ambassadors and advocates."*
- *"Never underestimate the impact that a volunteer board member has on individual decision-makers when he or she (or they) makes time to accompany key staff to make personal calls on government."*
- *"The voice of the unpaid, volunteer board member, acting or speaking out of altruism and passion for a worthy cause, is potentially much more influential than the highest paid lobbyist."*

The Stand for Your Mission campaign envisions a reality where nonprofit and philanthropic missions are fully realized because board members are standing for the mission of their organizations and helping set priorities in partnership with government rather than waiting for the outcome. Join us.