Transforming Board Practice

State University
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NC COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
Empowering People · Providing Solutions

INSTITUTE FOR
NONPROFITS

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Susan Scherffius Jakes is the Associate State Program Leader for Community Development, an Extension Assistant Professor with NC Cooperative Extension and an Adjunct Professor in Psychology at North Carolina State University. She received a Ph.D. in Community Psychology from North Carolina State University.

Mary Tschirhart is a Professor of Public Administration at The Ohio State University. She served as Director of the Institute for Nonprofits and Professor of Public Administration at NC State University from 2008-2013. She has published extensively on nonprofit topics including board governance. She recently co-authored a text titled *Managing Nonprofit Organizations*. Dr. Tschirhart has served on six nonprofit boards in a variety of roles, including president, and led a nonprofit as its executive director.

Module 8

Board Meeting Communication

Goals for this Module

Participants will be able to:

- Identify common meeting obstacles, explain why they happen, and identify strategies for minimizing them

- Create engaging agendas that foster brainstorming & deliberation

- Practice consensus decision-making processes

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Communication "Pitfalls"

- Attribution error
- Focus on individual goals
- Defensiveness
  - Threatening others' "face"
  - Saving (our own) face
- Poorly Expressed Strong Emotion

Pitfall #1: Attribution Error

- Attributions are explanations we make for our own and others' behavior

- We often blame others' "bad" behavior on internal traits rather than external causes

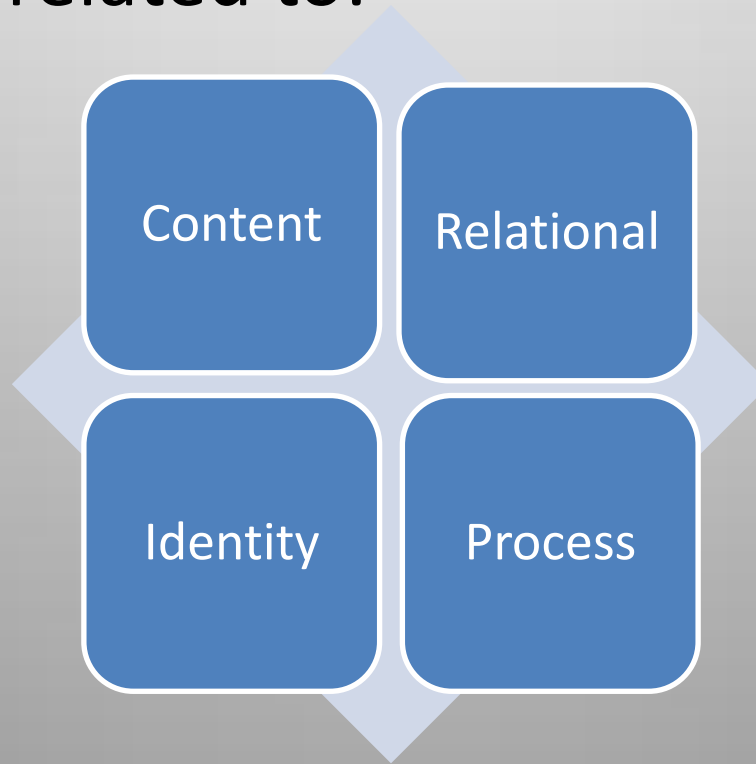- Our errors are based on previous relationships and impact future interactions with others

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Responding to Attributions

- Recognize the attribution you are making; you do not have to act on it

- Respond to the issue, not the behavior

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Pitfall #2: Individual Goals

Board members have multiple goals & expectations related to:

Content

Relational

Identity

Process

Responding to Individual Goals

- Balance individual interests with the common organizational goals

- Refocus the group on the organization's vision, mission, and values

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Balancing Individual & Group Goals

Someone raises a point or issue that is irrelevant to the agenda item:

- Validate the person
- Does it support the mission?
  - If yes, redirect to another place/time
  - If no, respectfully make boundaries clear

"We have limited time to meet our goals for this meeting; I would like to get together to talk about that another time."

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Pitfall #3: Defensiveness

Think about how you feel when someone says....

"These ideas will never work, we have tried them all before."

"We are all frustrated that we have failed in the past; how can we think about this differently?"

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Defensive & Supportive Communication

Defensive

- Evaluation
- Control
- Strategy
- Neutrality
- Superiority
- Certainty

Supportive

- Description
- Problem orientation
- Spontaneity
- Empathy
- Equality
- Provisionalism

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Communication Pitfalls
Practice Activity

A board member comes to a meeting very excited about a conversation they just had with a potential donor.

The donor is willing to make a fairly significant donation if your organization will collaborate on a project with another nonprofit.

The relationship between your mission and the other organization's mission are not immediately apparent.

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Pitfall #4:
Poorly Expressed Strong Emotion

Passion is a double-edged sword for nonprofit boards

Engagement ⬌ Intensity
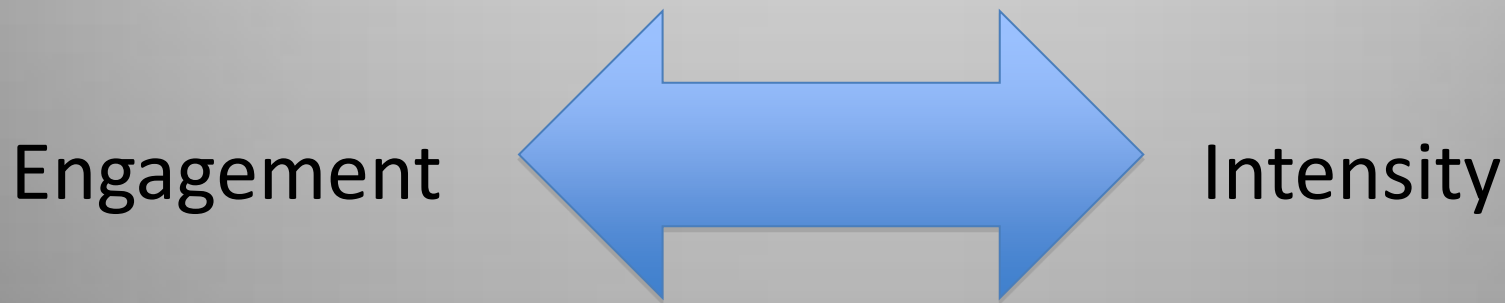
Intense Language

Imagine hearing the following statement in a raised voice:

"How could you possibly think that is a good idea? Isn't it our mission to serve this community in an ethical way?"

Intense Language

1. What emotion(s) do you think the speaker is feeling?

2. What does the speaker need to feel better and to engage appropriately?

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Reframing Intensity

- Validate the speaker

- Validate the underlying issue or concern

- Remind the speaker of the need for collaboration

- Re-state the concern using supportive communication

"You are reminding us of really important points and I can tell you feel strongly about this. Thank you for bringing us back to our mission..."

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Preventing Pitfalls

- Board Development
  - Communicate expectations
  - BOD manual
  - Communication training
- Provide opportunities for social interaction to build climate of trust
- Create agendas that allow for participation so all members feel included

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Agendas that Support Generative Governance

(1) Consent agendas

(2) Recap purpose of meeting

(3) Start with ritual to get everyone engaged

(4) Place fewer items on the

(5) Start each item with a question

(6) What haven't we thought of?

Building Agendas that Support Generative Governance

- What does a "typical" board meeting look like?

- What could you include in the agenda to support and facilitate generative governance?

- How would board member expectations have to be changed to make this work?

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Voting & Consensus

Why are juries in criminal cases required to come to a unanimous decision on innocence or guilt?

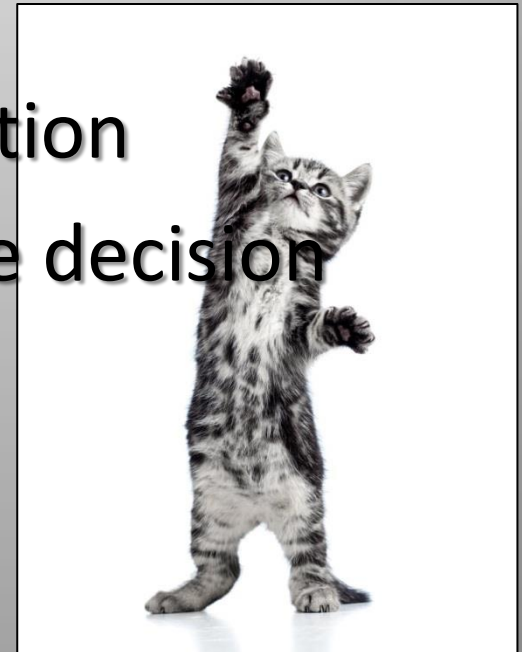Discuss advantages and disadvantages of majority versus unanimous voting.

Consensus Process

All must agree before decision is final.

Consensus check: rate decision 1-4

  – 4: Strongly support

  – 3: Support with some reservation

  – 2: Oppose but will not impede decision

  – 1: Strongly oppose

Discuss until all interests are met

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Putting it All Together

Read the case:
"Greater Euclid Little Theater"

Role-play this board's next meeting:
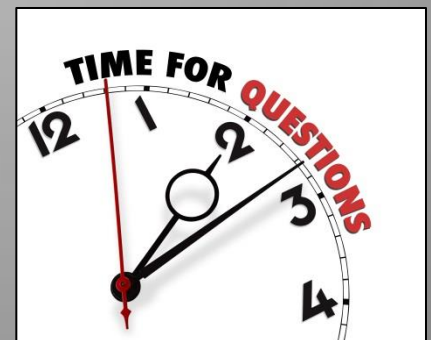- Prepare agenda
- Practice supportive communication
- Avoid attribution error
- Focusing on common goal
- Reframe emotionally intense language

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Evaluation

What are the key points of this module?

- What did you find most useful?
- What can we improve upon?
- Other items you want us to cover?

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Curriculum Modules

Module 1: Foundations for Transforming Board Practice

Module 2: Legal and Recruitment Issues

Module 3: Governance and Board Structure

Module 4: Enhancing Board Engagement

Module 5: Constructive Conflict

Module 6: Tools for Strategic Thinking

Module 7: Asking the Right Questions

Module 8: Board Meeting Communication

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Curriculum Modules

PDF copies of the curriculum modules are

available for viewing on the

NC Thrive portal:

http://communitydevelopment.ces.ncsu.

edu/local-government-nonprofits/

Resources

- Portions of this document was prepared by Cynthia Brown of The Sojourner Group on June 25, 2004. Contents are based on facilitator's experience and excerpts from the following sources: *Center for Community Change Organizational Development Series, The Working Board: Guidelines and Sample Documents; The Ball Foundation Eduation Initiatives: Running Effective Meetings>/Agendas and Minutes at* http://www.ballfoundation.org/ei/tools/meetings/agendas.html*.*

- *Nonprofit Organization Management, Supplement #2, published by Aspen Publishers, Inc.* The Best of the Board Cafe, available at http://www.compasspoint.org/bookstore

- *Governing for What Matters, Hildy Gottlieb, ReSolve, Inc. 2008* http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NP_Bd_Governing_for_What_Matters1-Art.htm

- The Board Café Archives at http://www.boardcafe.org

- *The Best of the Board Cafe, available at* http://www.compasspoint.org/bookstore

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References

- *Governing for What Matters, Hildy Gottlieb, ReSolve, Inc. 2008* http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NP_Bd_Governing_for_What_Matters1-Art.htm

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- *Gibb, J. (1961). Defensive communication. The Journal of Communication, 11(3), pp. 141-148. The article also appeared in ETC: A Review of General Semantics, Vol. 22, No. 2, June 1965, pp. 221-230. Reprint:* http://www.healthy.net/scr/Article.asp?Id=2533

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- Holland, T.P. & Jackson, D.K. (1998). Strengthening board performance: Findings and lessons from demonstration projects. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 9*(2), 121-134.

- Masaoka, J. (1999). *All hands on board: The boards of directors in all volunteer organizations.* Washington, DC: Board Source.

- Miller-Millesen, J. L. (2003). Understanding the behavior of nonprofit boards of directors: A theory based approach. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 32*(4), 521-547.

- *Nonprofit Organization Management, Supplement #2, published by Aspen Publishers, Inc.* The Best of the Board Cafe, available at *http://www.compasspoint.org/bookstore*