

Five Most Important Board Responsibilities

By Andrew Leach, MBA

Many Aboriginal communities and organizations create a Board of Directors to govern their work. In this article, I describe the five most important responsibilities for Boards, based on research and my frontline experience with Aboriginal Boards.

Responsibility #1: Clearly Understand Your Purpose

First and foremost, Boards need a clear purpose to give the organization focus and direction. Without a clear purpose, Boards tend to wander.

Unfortunately, we've all seen weak mission statements that are merely a string of various ideas. Instead, determine your organization's reason for being to produce a strong mission statement. Develop your mission statement to answer the question "Why are we here?" and use skilled editing. Don't be hesitant to update the mission statement, if changes in your mandate warrant it.

Responsibility #2: Hire the Best

Board work can be very rewarding if you have the right people working for you. But not having the right talent, especially at the top, will make Board work very cumbersome. Keep in mind the Board's selection of a senior manager is probably the most important decision it will make.

Find someone with a track record of executing organizational plans. Don't get too caught up in someone's academic background. Having a degree doesn't mean someone can lead, manage or execute; some people are good at school but not managing.

Responsibility #3: Develop Short-term Goals

After you've hired your talent, stay focused on your mission (see #1, above). Develop short-term goals to achieve your purpose. Ask yourselves, "What do we want to accomplish this year?"

A one-year plan should detail specific tasks you want accomplished, and identify people to carry out tasks and achieve implementation within timelines. The Board can also use this plan to monitor the senior manager's activities and performance.



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Your short-term objectives should align with your long-term strategy. This statement may seem obvious. But many organizations start out in one direction and end up heading in another. One reason is that some organizations go after government funding that is not exactly "up their alley." As a result, these groups can end up serving funding agents more than their own mission.

Responsibility #4: Monitor Progress

If you have hired people to carry out your work, you need to ensure they are heading in the right direction. The best way to monitor progress is by having a clear, constructive relationship with your senior manager.

Also hold regular Board meetings to chart your progress, and ensure Board meetings are properly structured to ensure everyone's time is well spent.

Responsibility #5: Assess Your Own Performance

Finally, Boards need to evaluate their own performance. This step is critical to review and correct course wherever necessary. These evaluations are often done during retreats or weekend meetings. It may be beneficial to have an outsider facilitate such a session.

Other evaluations are more comprehensive and may entail site visits, personal interviews, and reviewing financial statements or other reports. Like the retreats, organizational reviews may require the assistance of outside support.

Summary

Undoubtedly, Boards do more than the steps outlined above. Nevertheless, these steps are crucial and should take up the bulk of a Board's time and resources.

These guidelines can also be used for other governing entities, such as elected councils. However, rather than a mission, a First Nations Council should develop a mandate for the duration of its term.

The bottom line is that governing entities should have a solid sense of where they are, where they want to go, and how they are going to get there.



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