Training Playbook:

Forming and Working with a 501(c)(3) Board

Introduction

If you choose to encourage the formation of a 501(c)(3) support group for your shelter, you will play a leading role in the organization's creation, launch and stewardship. Approach its board and committee members, especially the board chair, as vital partners in moving your agency toward its most transformational goals.

At the same time, you will need to maintain your operational boundaries. While boards should know enough about operations to make decisions for which they are responsible, they should focus on governance and fundraising, not micromanagement. Clear roles and responsibilities are essential.

Board leaders often falter by giving only sketchy information in the recruitment phase, then try to compensate with "training" once individuals are already on the board.

Really great boards strive to establish a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, relationship with staff, personal giving and fundraising expectations with each potential board member *before* asking the individual to join the board. Some organizations have found that asking individuals to serve for a year on a major committee can be a great way to determine whether someone should proceed to board service.

Getting Started

Here are some steps for getting started:

- Identify the skills and industry contacts you need to form the 501(c)(3) and grow it for year one.

- It is easier to work directly and quickly with a small group, so recruit 3-5 individuals, based on your skills and contacts assessments. Then get the organization created (incorporation and 501(c)(3) status) and establish objectives for year one. You can build out other layers of leadership over the course of the year, folding in one or more representatives of existing volunteer programs, if appropriate.

- Adapt your needs list over time to help ensure that you continue to grow in years two and three. Your ultimate goal is to add skills and contacts that ensure your strategic plan will be fulfilled, but for now, your vision of the future may be your most powerful recruiting tool.

- Do your homework on governance documents and then ensure that the group puts them in place and reviews them at least annually. In today's world, policies on privacy, transparency and cyber-security are considered essential building blocks of ethical behavior. Donors (and the IRS) expect integrity beyond reproach.

- With your legal counsel's help, draft a Memorandum of Understanding that clearly outlines the relationship and shared agreements between the shelter or

municipality and the 501(c)(3) support group. This document (see sample here) should include information on how the agency and support group will work together, communicate and resolve any potential conflicts. The opportunity for dialogue is as important as the document itself. Two resources to help with what can be challenging conversations are listed at the end of this playbook.

- Do your homework on appropriate relationships between board and staff. Even though most resources will be written for the staffs of nonprofits rather than staffs of municipalities, the content found in resources from BoardSource and the Bridgespan Group will offer you valuable insights that you won't have to learn on the ground. These resources also have templates for board job descriptions and other useful tools. Start with this Maddie's Fund conference video on forming a board and this short article from BoardSource on acceptable interaction between board and staff.

Growth and Change

As the board grows, stay alert to the following:

- Growth in diversity and community representation, not just size

- Continued personal giving (100% of the board) at levels that are commensurate with their capacity and status as "champions" for the shelter

- Succession planning with the board chair and major committee members

- Regular reviews of governance documents so that they stay current and tools like conflict of interest documents are signed and dated

- Engagement with the major strategies for moving your agency forward, especially those around community awareness and fundraising

- Personal satisfaction of board members

- Recognition opportunities (public and private, depending on individual board member preferences)

This BoardSource blog offers some great food for thought as you and your 501(c)(3) board begin to focus on scale and impact rather than creation and stability.

It's an Art, Not a Science

The relationship-building skills that help you raise money will also help you and your board's leaders build an effective board that grows and adapts with changing circumstances. If relationship-building is not your strength, you may want to consult Daniel Goleman's videos or books on emotional intelligence. While you can delegate some tasks to your leadership team once the 501(c)(3) is up and running, you will always need to be the primary steward of board relationships.

When individuals leave a board, they can still be great ambassadors. There should be defined opportunities for members with "emeritus" status to contribute and be recognized. You must also make a commitment to continue relationship-building with these former board members.

Conclusion

Recruiting, onboarding, stewarding and collaborating with a 501(c)(3) board will be one of your greatest challenges, but if it's managed well, this partnership can be a critical strategy for transforming the way animals are treated in your community. There are many resources to assist you, but success will ultimately depend on what you are willing to invest, whom you recruit and how well you collaborate.

Resources

- *Getting to Yes* and *Difficult Conversations* are two slim books written by members of the Harvard Negotiation Project. They offer insights into the art of conversations in which "the outcome really matters." If you don't have the time to read these books, check out the online summaries: Getting to Yes and Difficult Conversations.

- BoardSource offers a variety of online resources related to board relations, and The Bridgespan Group is a well-respected consulting firm whose services include leadership development.

- Many community foundations will have experience with (and resources for) board development. Check with your local community foundation or look for those near you through this Council on Foundations website tool.

- Google your state's name followed by "center for nonprofits," and you may find a nonprofit resource center for groups in your state. These centers may be stand-alone facilities or attached to a university or college with a nonprofit management program.