

CRITICAL PATH FOR THE BOARD

by Jan Masaoka

What *is* the board supposed to be discussing, anyway? Instead of a list of "5 things the board should discuss," in this issue we offer a powerful approach to determining the board's agenda—and work—for the year.

CRITICAL PATH FOR THE BOARD

Whether on a current or past board, perhaps you have had the experience of seeing months go by without a discussion that feels either genuinely important or interesting. One reason may be that traditional board agendas are heavy on committee and staff reports, such as Finance Committee Report, Fundraising Committee Report, or Executive Director Report. There isn't much to do except listen.

Many boards and their executive directors complain about a "lack of engagement" and bring in speakers or even undertake strategic planning as ways to "get the board engaged." But even if there is discussion at meetings, shouldn't the goal be something more than just lively talking? Instead of "How can we get the board engaged?" perhaps the question should be: "WHAT should the board engage with?"

The term "critical path" originated in the field of project management to mean the sequence of milestones that a project must follow to finish in the shortest amount of time. The term has come broadly to mean the path or sequence of decisions and actions that will lead to success.

One way to get to this critical path for the board is to clarify what the critical path is for the organization this year. At least annually, ask this question of the executive director and the

board officers: **What does the organization NEED to accomplish this year? What are the most important two or three things that have to get done?**

The answer might be, "to be named one of the six city lead health centers," "to move to a new office," "to get our enrollment up," "to either fire or see great improvement in the CEO," "to get our finances under control," "to explore and maybe merge," "to find a way to raise salaries," or "to get the board's act together in preparation for hiring a new executive director."

The Big Job for the organization (or two or three jobs) will lead naturally to two other questions. **First, what does the board need to do in order to get this Big Job done? And second, what do board members need to know in order to do that?**

Let's look at an example of a Big Job and the board's critical path, and imagine an organization that matches adult mentors with young people. This organization has two big issues in front of it. First, although they have a waiting list, they don't have enough mentors, so their matches have declined by 18% over the last year—what is the problem and what can be done about it? Second, they have enjoyed a substantial 3-year grant from the county which

will be ending in six months. Should the organization expect to get a renewal? Plan to cut back? Find another source of income?

- Finance Committee-Contingency budget if county funding is not renewed

Old agenda:

- Finance Committee report-last month's financial statements
- Fundraising Committee-ask members to contribute raffle prizes
- Executive Director's report-mentor recruiting

New agenda:

- County funding: Form task force to investigate likelihood of renewal; develop strategy for renewal (such as board member meetings with county officials)
- Matches: Report from board-staff task force on the ten interviews they've conducted with mentors to learn how they were recruited. Review plan from executive director on staff work to recruit more mentors. Generate and prioritize list of ways that board members can assist with recruiting.

In short, **by beginning with what the organization has to accomplish and then what the board has to accomplish—and what it thereby has to discuss—is grounded in the pressing and meaningful real work.**

The critical path may have been outlined in a recent strategic plan, or there may be a major" event" such as executive director departure, a substantive funding cut, or other matter. A discussion of the critical path will lead naturally to which committees and task forces are needed, what kinds of board members need to be recruited, what individual and group tasks there are for the board, and to what key items the board must hold the executive director accountable.

What is the most important issue, challenge or problem facing your organization? And when did the board last discuss this?

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