THE THIRD SECTOR REPORT

Board Member Burn-Out:
Overcoming an Industrial Hazard

By Jeffrey R. Wilcox, CFRE

If the nonprofit sector had a unique industrial hazard as compared to other enterprises, board burn-out would surely be at or near the top of the list of high risks. At a time when more people are juggling the demands of their jobs, commutes and making ends meet while caring for themselves and others, asking a small battalion of volunteers to continually come in to an organization to weigh in, buy in, pitch in, and chip in creates a high risk for eventually feeling done in.

It's often been said, with good-intentioned humor, that people who serve on boards will eventually term out, be phased out, or, most likely, burn out.

Over the years, the term, "burned out," has been the focus of numerous studies. The once cliché expression now has its own definition published in most medical dictionaries and industrial psychology glossaries: A chronic condition of emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from stresses brought on by internal pressures and environmental conditions that become overwhelming to the point of uncharacteristic aggression or withdrawal and physical illness.

The culture of a board and the demands placed on each board member, combined with the respect given to the external stresses each faces in their own lives, is an equation that can't be ignored in the science of nonprofit leadership.

The first sign of burn-out is a board member's eroding enthusiasm to participate. A worsening sign is during discussions, the burned-out board member increasingly becomes more confrontational in discussions, displays a loss of objectivity, and offers unwarranted criticisms of people and processes.

Preventing board member burn-out isn't a simple matter. It's not about making sure someone gets a birthday card. It's also not about putting yet another event on their calendar called, "The Board Social." These gestures of group respect and appreciation are essential, but acts of kindness, alone, don't reverse the malignant nature of burn-out.

The starting place is having an appreciation for what generally causes board members to evolve to burn-out out in the first place. Virtually all studies have concluded that the number one culprit is a lack of a common purpose compounded by unmanaged and unproductive meetings. The second cause is an apathy toward innovation and distrust of new ideas in favor of the way

things have always been done. Other reasons are too few are responsible for too much, not enough celebration, and no clear guidelines about expectations and consequences.

The first step to preventing or overcoming burn-out in the Third Sector is to deeply root people in "why" the organization and its people are so important. Every nonprofit leader should have a copy of Simon Sinek's book, "Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action," within arm's reach.

Board meetings that start out inspirational have a chance of breeding inspired people. "A Mission Moment" should be a standing agenda item that reminds people why they and the work of the organization are so important. People need a chance to share with others moments when the purpose of the organization and their personal association with it was made real.

A second approach to burn-out prevention is respecting "why" each person wants to be on the board and understanding what he or she is looking for in return for their investments of time, talent and loyalty. A Board Development or Governance Committee is an essential part of a thriving board's infrastructure. This designated group of board members is responsible for the care and feeding of their fellow directors through personal relationship-building, assuring productive and managed meetings, conducting board evaluations, and discussing ways to give people what they are looking for.

The third element is a culture of goals, outcomes, and roles rather than processes, up-dates, and information-overload provide focus. An agenda that states an outcome is more likely to get a group of people focused on working with one another to bring that about. Stating a board's role in any matter up for discussion is also more likely to keep people focused on assuming that role.

Board member burn-out is a very real industrial hazard that can cause great harm to the progress of great organizations. Preventing and managing burn-out begins by acknowledging that simple fact.

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