

# Risk and Resilience: The Board's Role



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Recently we've been fielding a variety of questions about the board's risk role. Across the board, members of nonprofit governing teams want to support the missions they admire. Board members want to help an organization: 1. weather future disruptions (think COVID-19), 2. bolster resilience, and 3. prepare to survive and thrive during the next interruption or disruption to normal.

The NRMC team applauds the commitment of millions of volunteer board members who have reached out to their staff teams to express concern and offer to help. We urge nonprofit executives to tap into the board's commitment by identifying specific areas where individual board members—and the board as a whole—can support the organization.

One perennial worry expressed by countless CEOs is how to invite the board 'inside' to help without luring the board out of its 'governance' lane and into the lane occupied by the management team. The crux of the fear is that once board members—or the board as a whole—grasps the reins of 'management' or 'operations,' they will be loath to let go.

## Manage Board Involvement Risk

Consider the following tips and strategies to manage the risk of the board going overboard as it works to support your mission and build resilience to weather future disruptions.

### **1. Cultivate a shared, forthright understanding of the board's role.**

During my first stint on a nonprofit board, I was surprised to learn that one of my assigned tasks was to count cash receipts during our annual fundraising event. My assumption—wrong in this case—was that board service would be focused on policy and strategy setting.

Instead, I learned that board members of this small, community-based organization would wear different hats depending on the issue at hand. For example, during the annual event, we became ticket takers, cash counters, costumed tour guides, and parking attendants. Then our roles would shift, and during board meetings, we discussed resource development strategies, legal risks, financial health, and more. While some boards fit neatly into the 'operational, hands-on board' type or 'strategic, governing board' type, most boards do mostly one with a bit of the other.

### **2. Acknowledge the practical, mission-supporting practice of changing hats.**

Many board members are recruited for their professional acumen or subject matter expertise. During difficult moments in your mission's history, the wisdom and insights of these board members are invaluable assets you should tap. Help your board understand that there may be times when you call on them for subject matter expertise versus direction or decisions.

Several years ago, the CEO of one of the boards I served on would contact me from time to time with employment-related risk questions. During those conversations, I always reminded him that “I’m sharing this information as a subject matter expert; managing people and employment matters is your lane.” That CEO always seemed grateful for the reminder. There was no need for him to worry that I was directing him to do something or not do something. An easy way to acknowledge that role change is to say, “I’m taking off my board member hat now.” If you’re the CEO and worried about role uncertainty, consider saying, “Would you be able to take off your board member hat and provide subject matter expertise on this topic? I know I’m charged with making the decision. I just want to learn as much as I can before I do that.”

### **3. Be proactive and identify ways that your board can be helpful during periods of disruption.**

Instead of waiting for the calls and stumbling over a request for help, identify several ways that board members can be supportive during any period of disruption. That way, when offers of help are extended, you’ll be ready with options for the board to consider. For example:

- Our volunteer team needs extra hands for the event taking place in two weeks. That team works under the supervision of Andrea. Let me provide a number or email you can use to share your interest.
- Some of our donors are under stress this year due to job losses, extra expenses to support family members, and other unexpected circumstances. If you can make an additional contribution this year, your generosity will help us resume core services as quickly as possible.
- I’d love to know what are you hearing and seeing in your industry concerning accommodating varying staff circumstances and wants with respect to working from a central office. I’m hearing that flexibility is the foundation of a new normal for organizations like ours.

### **4. Encourage the board to think big about what’s next for your mission.**

Periods of uncertainty and new routines spark worry in some colleagues and excitement in others. Some imagine the worst that could happen, while others see the potential to seize the day and make positive changes to propel a mission forward. If your board members fall into the latter category and you sense an ‘itch’ to do something big, consider forming a Task Force to explore bold possibilities.

A book I read last year suggested a “Blank Slate Reinvention” exercise whereby a team imagines what an organization would look like if there were an opportunity to begin anew. In *Create the Future + The Innovation Handbook*, Jeremy Gutsche writes that “Most great ideas come from similar times of urgency. If you aren’t feeling urgency, there’s probably an opportunity somewhere that you’re missing out on.” The NRMC team’s favorite prompt to spur bold ideas is: “What big risk should we take this year to advance our mission?” A board team focused on that question is bound to develop an exciting slate of moves for the entire board to ponder.

The statement “If you want something done, do it yourself” is often attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte. Many a nonprofit leader has uttered those words. Yet, it’s absurd to believe that any nonprofit mission can be delivered by a party of one. The expansive, community-serving ambitions of modern nonprofits necessitate a wide range of views, the energy and commitment of a team, many hands and brains, and abundant finesse.

At some time, every nonprofit CEO will receive an offer of help that is a poor match for the nonprofit’s needs. From time to time, these offers come from insiders: a member of the board. Although your instinct may be to say, “No, but thank you,” I encourage you to hold back on the ‘no’ and instead promise to reflect on the offer. Pause and ask yourself: what do we need most right now? How could this board member’s interests and skills be applied to what we truly need? What can I suggest to honor the board member’s enthusiasm and bring a tangible benefit to our mission?

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