

Building Better Boards

We're not talking about the boards you build homes with, but the boards that govern the hundreds of businesses, non-profit organizations and agencies in your community. Chances are if you haven't served on some type of board you have done business with an organization that is overseen by a board or you have participated in an organization that is governed by a board. And unfortunately, many groups expect board members to serve with little or no training as to their roles and responsibilities.

Don't take your responsibility as a board member lightly! The board of directors for a non-profit organization has ultimate legal responsibility for all organizational matters. These usually include:

- appointing a manager or director
- setting major policy decisions in such areas as personnel, fiscal policy and so forth
- the overall planning of programs and setting priorities
- approval of proposals and budgets
- compliance with grants
- keeping accurate records
- reporting (for example financial reports, evaluations of programs)

One of the first steps most organizations should undertake is to have written descriptions of the responsibilities of their board members. Request a copy of the bylaws to make sure you know the rules by which the board is governed.

With this in mind, here are a few suggestions to help you ensure that any board you serve on is effective and efficient. First, be sure you clearly understand the purpose of the organization. Know the limits of your purpose and work within those limits. When in doubt ask – and ask again if the explanation isn't clear.

Keep records of everything. It's better to have a record and not need it than to need a record of a decision and not have it. Don't hesitate to ask whether a decision has been recorded in the minutes. When you receive minutes of meetings check them to be sure they are complete and accurate before voting to approve them.

Avoid mass meeting management. When a large group takes on a task they often bog down and become unproductive. Divide responsibilities and use committees to develop the work of the board. Then pay attention to committee reports to be sure you understand what they're saying.

In Missouri, any tax supported agency (including those who receive government grants or tax credits) must comply with the Sunshine Law for open meetings. Be sure you understand the requirements of this law and follow it.

Consider your role as a board member that of a trustee of someone else's property and keep in mind your responsibility to the members or owners of that organization to ensure that resources are used as intended. For more information on training for non-profit boards, contact Georgia Stuart-Simmons at 660-747-3193.