



Performance Reviews – A Critical Function for a Charity Board

By Sol Kasimer, CEO, Altruvest Charitable Services

Governance is a “hot topic” these days – not just in business but in the not for profit / charity world too.

In the work I do with Altruvest Charitable Services our BoardMatch programs help interested, talented people from the private sector to contribute to the charitable sector as members of boards. We see enhanced governance – better people on better functioning boards – as key to increasing the capacity of Canada’s charities.

I often speak and write about getting people on boards. But an obvious next question is: what will people do once they join the board of a charity? What are essential actions of a board that will drive performance?

The answers to this question are a varied as there are charities and board members but there are a few areas I am convinced are common to all boards and essential to good governance.

First and foremost boards and directors must understand their roles and the role of staff in the organization. Even the most dedicated volunteers will contribute a few hours a week and in most cases a few hours a month. Full time staff will always have more time, more involvement and more detailed knowledge of the organization, its stakeholders and context.

There is nothing to be gained by directors trying to “out manage management.” Staff and directors have separate but complimentary roles and responsibilities. It is important that each party understand and practice the special contribution that they make – what is the unique role of the board, what is the role of staff and how do they work together?

Beyond the legal and fiduciary responsibilities of a Board perhaps the most crucial duty of every board is performance evaluation. First and foremost a board must evaluate its own performance and the performance of the individual directors. Of course to evaluate performance one must have clear understanding of goals and tasks set out. Without a plan and expectations around performance goals it is impossible to evaluate the board and directors.

Essential to any charity – and I expect to any for profit as well – is clarity of purpose. What are we trying to do? How will we make a difference? Where do we want to go?



With a strong clear mission an organization can set strategic directions and specific measurable outcomes and performance expectations.

Performance evaluation and goal setting is fundamental in the corporate world. A huge contribution directors can make in a charity is to impose the same method and rigour to their volunteer job as they do in their “day job.” And with a variety of work experience among directors a board has a variety of goal setting and performance tracking systems to learn from. (For another day we can discuss diversity on boards but here is a perfect example of diversity in action – not just diversity of background or demographics but diversity of experience and skills. For example when directors can share different performance management systems and pick and choose the best – or best components of many – the whole organization benefits from the diversity of experience at the board table just as it will when the board hires an ED, does strategic planning, environmental scanning, resource development, etc..)

With a proper performance evaluation of the board and directors in place an essential duty of the board is performance review of the Executive Director. (Your organization might have a different job title – say CEO or president – but for the purposes here I will use the title Executive Director for the key staff person reporting to the board). Again directors can help devise the tools but any good performance system (just like the performance evaluation of the board and directors) will sit in context of what the organization wants to accomplish, what outcomes are desired, what strategies will drive outcomes and what measures will let you know your are on track to support your mission.

Reviewing performance, feeding back to the system and setting goals and expected outcomes for the next period are critical not just for the individual but also for the organization. Performance reviews also allow for information exchange, coaching and feedback on how the ED and board is / can / should be / ... working together to drive organizational performance.

A rigorous, thoughtful review of performance (for directors, board and ED) sets a wonderful example through the whole organization – one that will be followed through with all staff and key volunteer groups. Performance review is a critical task for a board and one that sets a tone and drives performance.



Sol Kasimer

With almost 35 years service in the charitable sector Sol Kasimer is regarded as a knowledgeable leader in the sector.

Sol Kasimer is CEO of Altruvest Charitable Services – an organization dedicated to expanding the talent pool and enhancing governance skills of charitable sector boards and senior leaders fostering more effective charities and stronger Canadian communities. BoardMatch is the best known of Altruvest's programs.

Operating in the Greater Toronto Area and now in partnership with Volunteer Vancouver over 800 trained and enthusiastic people now serve on more than 400 charity boards through BoardMatch. (www.boardmatch.org)

Sol is very active in the voluntary sector especially interested in collaboration between the voluntary, public, and private sectors. Currently, he is Co-Chair of the Capacity Joint Table for the Voluntary Sector Initiative, Director with the Public Policy Forum, was a founding member of the Voluntary Sector Roundtable, and active in several voluntary sector networks.

Sol Kasimer is the past Chief Executive Officer of YMCA Canada, a national body providing coordination and support to 63 Associations from coast to coast with operating budgets of \$400 million.

Sol has a Masters of Science in Human Development from Purdue University.