



The Board as a Strategic Asset

By Sol Kasimer, CEO, Altruvest Charitable Services

On strategy Miyamoto Musashi once said:

Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things.

The same could be said of good governance. Or, as someone else said,

The board table is where you get your answers questioned.

From 34 years experience in the charitable sector I am convinced that a key to organizational excellence is good governance. By good governance I mean board and staff working in partnership with a clear purpose and clarity of roles and responsibilities.

In a great organization the board is a key strategic asset.

The challenge is to think of the board (collectively and the component individuals) as an asset; define roles and responsibilities; work together yet celebrate each other's differences; share a passion and drive to a shared vision.

Passion and commitment are strengths of the sector but I expect half of all operating charities and non-profits could use work on their governance systems and structures. Are the Board, committees and staff all doing the right thing and are their efforts aligned to the organization's mission? Do we harness the passion and work efficiently – volunteers and staff – to deliver the mission?

Another day we can discuss the board and volunteer contribution to external scanning, strategic planning, resource development and the host of strategic and tactical issues that can crop up as volunteers and staff work together. But for the moment let's think about seeing your the board not as an annoyance, not as free labour, not as a rubber stamp but as a true strategic asset.

At any time strategic governance makes sense but in Canada today the sector faces an enormous challenge. There are 80,000 registered charities in need of 1,000,000 policy volunteers (and I expect the numbers for the not for profit sector are about the same). All in the context of a 3 – 5% decline in volunteerism in Canada. We can't waste



organizations' time or people's time – there is too much work for the sector to do and already too few resources. A board must be a positive force and organizations can strengthen their performance with a strategically recruited, oriented, managed and evaluated board.

At my organization, Altruvest Charitable Services, we work to make a difference by building capacity in the sector through enhanced governance – better people (both skilled and trained) on better functioning boards working with skilled dedicated staff will drive organizational effectiveness.

At its most basic a board's job is (working with staff) to set and communicate direction, understand the resources (financial and human) required to achieve the plan, monitor and evaluate performance (performance of staff and performance of the board and individual board members) and provide general oversight.

Often, especially in small organizations volunteers might wear many hats ranging from board member (with policy, strategic and fiduciary responsibilities) to volunteer staff doing everything from delivering program to helping write the newsletter or setting up financial and computer systems. Board members should be welcomed and encouraged to “roll up their sleeves” but always remember that volunteers can wear many hats and make sure everyone knows which hat one is wearing when and never confuse the role of a director with the other volunteer activities one takes on.

A charity or not for profit is not a business but we can act in a business like manner. Any business needs critical skills like planning, resource development, systems, technology, HR and legal as well as the specific manufacturing or service skills that define their offering. And our sector needs the exact same skills

The great strength of the charitable sector is program skills but what about fundraising, planning, finance, technology, HR, legal – all skills demanded and present in any business setting? A small charity can't afford to have all these skills on staff so naturally turn to the board. I don't suggest for a moment forcing board volunteers on a “busman's holiday” – let's get a lawyer on the board for free legal work, an IT professional can fix my printer, ... – but business people with these skills can act as guides and offer a critical second set of eyes to a problem.

But the most important contribution a thoughtfully composed board offers is not just a difference in background, or a difference in job but the difference in opinion and perspective that diverse job skills, experience and education provides.



The right people – staff and volunteers – transform an organization. Understand the people on your board (or the people you need on the board), be very clear about roles and responsibilities, celebrate diverse opinions and perspectives, evaluate performance against plan – organizational performance, staff performance and board performance – and use the strategic asset you have – the board – to drive organizational performance and excellence.

Sol Kasimer

With almost 35 years service in the charitable sectors Sol Kasimer is regarded a very 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 700 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.