What Can Cause Problems with Relationships?

The effectiveness and efficiency of not-for-profits is contingent on strong working relationships. The biggest asset of a not-for-profit is its human capital. Volunteers, in particular leaders and staff, are crucial to an organization's capacity to fulfill its mandate.

We tend to assume things will work well. After all, isn't everyone there to help with the mandate? In reality not everyone comes to the association with the same level of commitment and competencies. As a result, some are not working at the level required to sustain and grow relationships, and situations will occur that will lead to irritants and potential for conflict. If your stakeholders aren't committed to sustaining relationships or to aggressively making improvements, some challenging moments will occur. Your association may become distracted and waste precious resources.

It is important to reflect on situations in our organizations and consider means through which we can enhance our relationships. The following situations may provide early warning signals or indicate that your organization is off track or, worse yet, in dire straights. The situations focus on the board, directors and the chief staff officer (CSO), and reflect situations that make the relationships between the board, directors and CSO challenging. Also provided are some short stories from students in the CAE program. These are not myths. They are, of course, disguised.

Who is in charge?

"Our Chair decided who he wanted to be Vice Chair this year, and presented it for approval at a Board meeting with no prior discussion. It passed, with a stunned silence. Other hopefuls were not provided an opportunity to express interest nor were the by-laws complied with."

Unconventional

"A previous CSO invited staff (all female) out for an evening - her treat. It turned out to be a cosmetic makeup demonstration in a church basement with us as the guinea pigs - and studio portraits were taken that we ended up having to pay $100+ each for. We had to dress up in really smelly outfits - feather boas, leopard-skin lycra tank tops, etc. to have these photos taken. The makeup was mixed with hairspray before being applied to our faces (I broke out in a rash).

It was difficult to refuse to buy the photos when the CSO brought them to the office and egged us on to buy. She didn't speak to us for days because we weren't suitably appreciative of her thoughtfulness. We had to buy her flowers to get back in her good graces. She couldn't understand why we refused all further invites."

Uncomfortable Situations

You know you're going to have challenges with relationships when you have a high number of the following negative situations occurring in your organization. These negative situations will result in missed expectations and poor performance, and will generate conflict with those who think and act otherwise.

Board Organization and Leadership

- Board recruitment is an activity that occurs a few weeks before the annual meeting. The Nominating Committee or directors take a few minutes to call a friend or colleague and downplay the level of commitment required
- New directors are blindly recruited and accepted to the board just because they may be a friend of an existing director
- Directors sit back and let the wealthiest or most important board member do what he/she wants, unchallenged, just because there is fear of losing their support for the organization
- Board members who decide they want to become paid staff without resigning from the board first and who want to return to the board if they don't get the paid position
- Boards re-elect board members who fail to perform
- Directors try to do business with the organization
- Directors believe they are volunteering free services and don't need further education and training to support their roles
- Directors believe for-profit business is more demanding and more difficult than running a not-for-profit
- Boards do not recognize the contributions of leaders who have done a great job
- Directors elect a totally unsuitable chair because no one else wants the job

Board Meetings and Decisions

- Directors focus only on historical financial information and not on other performance targets and variances
- Directors read the agenda for the first time at the meeting, forget about prior decisions, and claim they never received the information when everyone else has
- Directors spend half the meeting on an electronic device getting and responding to e-mail
- Directors request complex information that costs considerable time and effort to produce and then don't read the information provided
- The board does not conduct the due diligence necessary when it comes to hiring a CSO and does not consistently evaluate the CSO

- Directors see no need for the board to assess their own performance annually or set separate board goals
- Directors try to control the board and often avoid a consensus approach
- Directors don't know what constitutes conflict of interest and engage in activities that create conflicts of interest
- Board members do not respect the will of the entire board after a vote is taken as it goes against their way of thinking
- Directors do not respect there are certain issues that should not be discussed outside the board room with anyone, for legal as well as moral reasons, or they violate confidentiality rules
- Directors do not participate in orientation or do not ask what is expected of them
- Directors present reports when everyone knows they were just handed it as they walked into the room
- Directors are prepared to spend reserves or create a deficit rather than make difficult decisions about revenues and expenditures

Loyalty Rewarded

"Having worked for almost five years at a charity, I was growing increasingly nervous in terms of the Executive Director's declining performance and behaviour and was planning to begin a job search. However, I was also concerned that programming activities would become even more irrelevant to the agency if I should leave. I stayed at my position to support the organization long after the job had any real meaning or importance to me professionally.

As the Executive Director's behaviour became even more negative, he became suspicious (correctly) that I was uncovering some very grey situations within the agency because, in addition to my regular role, I had also assumed the duties of our event coordinator who had been laid off for no reason anyone was ever able to discern.

The Executive Director approached the board, told them the agency was facing serious financial challenges and informed them it was necessary to lay me off.

When the Board member (a lawyer) arrived at the office to inform me I was being laid off, I jumped up, cheered and hugged her… needless to say that was a red flag to her! She phoned later and asked for a private discussion. She inquired about my reaction. I told her that morally I had been reluctant to abandon the charity of my own accord. I was relieved to have had the decision taken out of my hands, and be removed from the negative environment. I suggested she "follow the money" as there seemed to be no logical reason for the charity to be in a fiscally negative position where key financial and event staff were being laid-off or resigning. Nothing had changed financially over the last four years. In fact finances should have been solid.

It turned out some funds were not being accounted for and eventually the CSO was asked to resign. I was asked to get help and the organization was soon on track and I assumed the role of CSO."

Staff

- Boards expect the CSO and staff to develop a plan in a short period of time and present it to the board, where the Board tears it apart as it does not contain what they think is important
- Directors that micromanage staff
- Boards that expect staff to recruit new board members
- Boards that fail to hold the CSO accountable for meeting goals
- Directors assume the not-for-profit staff have the same resource capacity as they do back in their large organization
- The board frequently telling the CSO what a great job they are doing year after year then change the locks and present him with a box of his personal effects and never explain why
- The Chair or President that does not move to replace an incompetent CSO because it would mean more work during their watch
- Directors promising to do certain work and never completed it and then hold the CSO accountable for the uncompleted term

Chief Staff Officer Leadership

- The CSO thinks of the board as his/her own personal core of volunteers, instead of as a boss
- The CSO recruits directors and wants to be able to recruit his/her own boss
- The CSO think the agenda is their sole responsibility
- The CSO brings every little thing to the board, and then wonders why the board meddles in every little thing
- The CSO dumps an organizational problem on the board, rather than bringing options, an analysis and recommendations for action
- The CSO does not get a clear agreement with the board on what is expected to be accomplished or what is priority
- The CSO blames the board for problems and creates potential hostility between the board and staff
- The CSO does not use volunteers beyond the board to provide advice or support and lets the board handle everything
- The CSO does not communicate information on all critical issues to the board or staff on a timely basis

Do some of these situations exist in your organization? There are solutions. It is easy to say we need new directors, a new CSO, or a new policy or improve communications as solutions to these situations. However, many of these situations are connected and must be dealt with in an integrated manner.

Understanding how situations are connected will get you closer to the root cause and more effective solutions. Students in the CAE program develop knowledge and skills to deal with these types of situations. Information is also available on the CSAE website. Now is the time to start reducing the number of these situations and get your organization back on track. If your organization is currently void of any of these situations, let me know.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to trends, issues, challenges and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the CAE Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.