TREC TOGETHER RISING AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNITY

TREC BOARDS RESOURCE

Strategies for Exemplary Board-ED Partnership in Times of Crisis

In a crisis like COVID-19, the quality of the Executive Director-Boards of Director partnership can boost your organization's functioning and long-term health, or it can make it worse. And, your focus and behavior as board members and EDs can greatly impact each other. More than ever, now is the time for boards, board members, and EDs to be exquisitely focused and aligned on making as much of a positive difference as possible: it could be the difference between your organization thriving or barely surviving.

The strategies addressed below speak mostly to the ED-Board partnership, but in some cases, speak directly to the role and functioning of the Board as there is typically less guidance for boards.

Here are several areas to consider:

1. **FOR BOARDS—SUPPORT THE STAFF:** They are almost certainly more stressed and uncertain about the future than ever before, managing unprecedented organizational and personal challenges. Ways you can support your team include:
    a. Ask what they need; don't assume you know or wait for them to tell you.
    b. Emphasize encouragement and gratitude in all your communications. Set an example of positivity.
    c. Acknowledge and celebrate success, however modest; don't just fixate on the challenges.
    d. Minimize non-critical requests to staff for information or help with board matters.
    e. Ensure personnel policies reflect "COVID reality," e.g., new and more flexible arrangements; ensure equitable treatment and access issues are flagged and addressed.
    f. And everything else in this post…

2. **SOLIDIFY AND FOCUS THE ED-BOARD CHAIR RELATIONSHIP:** The Chair-ED relationship is one of the most important in the organization when it functions well, the benefits amplify across the whole organization. Ensure your Chair-ED relationships is clear, solid, aligned, and focused and that as Chair, you are accessible, flexible, and responsive. You want the ED to be as open as possible with challenges and struggles and let them know that you as a Chair (and Board) are not expecting perfect or risk-free answers; sharing that you also have challenges will tell them they are not alone. Also, re-iterate the "no surprises" guideline – in both directions.

3. **UNDERSTAND AND MANAGE STRESS** and the unhelpful ways that it may show up in Board behavior. In times of stress, no one – including Board members – is

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immune to "fight, flight, freeze" types of responses even if, as board members, you think you're helping. Some common board behaviors that may surface or increase, and some ways you can reduce and manage this reactivity include:

a. **Micro-management or non-strategic, unpredictable requests for information**: "Stay in your lane" - Re-confirm and clarify your role vis a vis staff (See TREC's Resource Library for some board role and responsibility resources)
b. **Avoiding difficult conversations**: For example, if you, as a Board member, see unhelpful behavior from other board members, especially that impact staff, now is the time for you to speak up respectfully and encourage more effective behavior.
c. **Unsolicited suggestions**: Anxious and well-meaning board members may have ideas for what they think the organization should do in response to a crisis. Agree as a board how you want to gather board input. E.g., Ask board members to go through the Chair if they have questions, concerns, or suggestions and not contact staff directly. This is in line with the governance principle of "The Board speaks with one voice."

Also, ED's are not immune to 'fight, flight, freeze" type behaviors that impede effective interactions with the Board. Better to address these early and thoughtfully with the ED than let them fester.

4. **TAKE THE LEAD IN GIVING AND GETTING MONEY**:
   a. Give: No matter what amount, this is the time to ensure all board members make a personal contribution. It sends a huge positive to signal to staff, members, and supporters while providing vital funds to the organization.
   b. Get: If there ever was a time for "extraordinary fundraising" from boards, this is it! Explore with staff how your Board can support staff-led efforts and identify ways the Board can initiate and do your own fundraising (always in coordination with staff and not placing additional burden on them). Resources on Board fundraising strategies found in TREC's Resource Library.

5. **GET STAFF AND BOARD ON THE SAME PAGE EARLY IN CREATING ALTERNATIVE FINANCIAL SCENARIOS** about any possible major program changes or cutbacks. Doing this in advance of those situations occurring will mean that you can respond quickly and strategically if needed and not be scrambling in the heat of the moment. You do the hard work of getting to a shared vision of growth—or a shared plan for contraction - upfront, which leads to more rational decisions. What if you need to make an abrupt turn in your plan because of a drop in income, or suddenly need to shift program work, or face an attack on credibility? Would your Board be a help in a time of crisis? Or would they be another problem for you to manage? Do you have a Board member, for example, who doesn't agree on which programs are most core to your organization? Do the Board and staff agree on how reserves should be spent? Better to sort that out now, then later when you may be faced with the need to make immediate cuts.

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There is an excellent 15 minute "Planning for Uncertainty" tutorial in TREC's Resource Library that outlines a process for creating alternative financial scenarios using a *Program Planning Matrix.* It will help staff and Board see strengths and vulnerabilities, the key variables in your budget, and plan and help them to prepare for the likely changes and get everyone ready to make adjustments. And remember, throughout any planning process, the role and contribution of board members are not in the details of plans (weeds) but rather to operate at the governance level: bringing perspective, asking good questions and where appropriate, challenging assumptions, and providing a reality check. Part of this governance role could also include developing policies (with staff) on how financial decisions are made, e.g., will reserves be used, for what and decided by who, etc.

6. **CLARIFY AND ADDRESS BOARD MEMBER ENGAGEMENT EXPECTATIONS**: In times of crisis, you need all board hands on deck and engaged (informed, prepared, proactive, on-time, attentive, etc.). This could be a good opportunity to re-affirm your engagement expectations of board members and, if needed, have a direct conversation with any board members who haven't been engaged for whatever reason, those "missing in action," and ask them to "step up or step out." They may actually appreciate the opportunity to gracefully exit and leave with you with the Board you can rely on to be present and up-to-speed. Some helpful resources for addressing this type of issue are here.

7. **REVIEW FISCAL OVERSIGHT NEEDS/ROLES**: Board members will understandably have increased anxiety about the organization's financial health and prospects. Perhaps in line with the fiscal scenario planning described above, the ED and Board can agree on the key financial indicators they both will use and determine how they should and will be reported and used (to ensure Board doesn't get pulled into overreach, micromanagement, etc.). Some resources for effective financial reports to board are here.

8. **IDENTIFY AND LEVERAGE SPECIFIC BOARD EXPERTISE TO SUPPORT STAFF AS APPROPRIATE**: Do you have a Treasurer and other Board members with financial competency? How can you utilize their expertise and experience, or their networks, to help the organization? (And if you would like to support the role/impact of your Treasurer look at TREC's financial management webinars and other tools to become more knowledgeable about how things like reading financial statements). What are other areas of expertise on your Board that could be tapped?

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