

Is Your Volunteer Board a Group or a Team?



Volunteer Boards (VBs) face unique challenges. They include:

1. They receive no stipend, nor compensation for their time or travel
2. They are asked to make (sometimes significant) financial contributions to the organization as a condition of membership
3. They may not have the right skills or experience, but are passionate about the mission and want to help
4. The quality of their contributions (except for their financial giving) is typically not assessed. There are no consequences for exceptionally good or bad performance
5. They are hard to fire!

One of the challenges that face VBs is creating synergistic value to the organizations they serve. By this, we mean that “1 + 1 > 2;” that board members’ combined contributions are greater than what any one individual could offer. This can be especially difficult when VB members have an inflated view of their own skills and abilities, feel a strong need to impose their views on others, and are motivated by “winning” disagreements with other members.

This tension can also be considered in the frame of group vs. team. For us, a group is a collection of individuals who come together and interact around a topic of mutual interest. A team, on the other hand, has three defining characteristics:

1. There is a shared, accepted purpose that brings the members together. This is sometimes, but not always, codified in a team charter or organizational mission statement. ***This*** is what ***we, together***, have ***committed to do***.
2. In a team, that common purpose cannot be achieved without **the contributions of each and every member** of the team. There should not be “spectators” -- unless that is a role that is deemed essential to achieve the team’s shared outcome. Each team member should recognize the reason(s) they are part of the team and commit to fulfilling their role (and not someone else’s).
3. Team members **consciously, intentionally work together** with the first two characteristics top of mind. This recognition generates behaviors like:
 - a. Asking self and others, “Will this conversation/action/decision further our shared purpose?”
 - b. Making sure all voices are heard
 - c. Asking for and offering help based on who has the appropriate knowledge, skills, and experience
 - d. Engaging in productive conflict in the name of the shared purpose

Common Purpose



Inter-dependent

Acts like it!

- e. Holding self and others accountable for progress (or lack thereof) towards accomplishing the team's common purpose.

We encourage VB members, Chairs, and organizational leadership to reflect on the degree to which they are currently functioning as a group or team. There are ways to more formally assess team functioning and improve it if needed.

We hope this post is the catalyst for a larger conversation about this topic as well as other challenges facing Volunteer Boards. Please “comment” with your thoughts. Other articles in the series can be found on LinkedIn **#VolunteerBoards** or at www.larrysolow.com.