Does Your Volunteer Board Member Lack Skills or Competencies -- and does this difference matter?

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

1. They receive no 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!

This post focuses on the third issue -- specifically, the difference between attributes and competencies. **Attributes** can be considered the inherent traits or qualities an individual brings with him/her into the Board position. They are typically difficult to measure and are not usually amenable to training. An example is compassion.

Competencies on the other hand, are skills that can be taught and can be measured. For example, imagine your Board members need to know and use a video conferencing software like Zoom. Competence can be measured by their ability to log on, set up their webcam, connect to audio, share their screen, and use the chat feature. Each of these can be taught, coached, and assessed.

Most non-profit/mission-driven (NP/MD) organizations have a list of characteristics they desire in their VB Chair and members. That's the good news. There are (at least) two pieces of bad news:

1. They don't differentiate between attributes and competencies. Since VB members bring their attributes with them, they need to be screened for through interviews, reference checks, and informal interactions.

2. To the extent that NP/MD organizations identify needed competencies, they either:
   a. Assume the new VB member will take it upon him/herself to get the training and support they need to master that competency (that's a BIG assumption!), or

   b. Don't make quality training and support resources available as part of onboarding or board development activities, and/or

   c. Don't have a mechanism for assessing (and praising!) progress for the individuals doing the hard work of learning and using a new skill.

Volunteer Board members already have a lot on their plates. Non-Profit/Mission-Driven organizations can do a better job of recruiting and retaining qualified Board members by being clear about the attributes and competencies required, and creating systems and processes to be sure they are present.

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.