

Clarifying Roles of Volunteer Boards and the Organizations They Serve

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!

Task	CPI	CM/BX	PDS	Project Mgt.	Program Mgt.	Bus. Ldrship
Share/ disseminate tools, process	R	R	R	V		
Utilize process on a daily basis	C	C	C	R	A	
Coach/support tools, steps	R	R	R	R	C	
Coordinate progress and address discrepancies between projects				C	R	A

One of the biggest obstacles to effective Volunteer Board (VB) functioning is confusion regarding “who does what” -- within the Board itself, and between the Board and the organization it serves. Defining five types of roles has proven helpful in a wide variety of organizations to address this issue. The five types of roles (“VARCI”) are defined below:

Veto (“*The stamp of approval*”): Person or group must be included in decision prior to decision being made or task being completed. The decision making process stops until this review occurs, and the input is binding.

Accountable (“*The buck stops here*”): Lowest level person or function (there should only be one) within the organization that will take the credit -- or blame -- for the activities and results of those responsible for task accomplishment. This is typically (but not always) one level higher than the people responsible for performing the “day to day” activities related to the task or decision.

Responsible (“*Doers*”): Individual(s) or group(s) who are actively engaged in carrying out the task.

Consulted (“*Trusted advisor*”): Individuals or groups are offered the opportunity to be included in the decision making prior to a decision being made. Different than the “veto” role described above, the process doesn’t stop if they aren’t available and their input is not binding.

Informed (“*Need to know*”): People or groups in this role are not directly involved in the decision making process itself, but need to know the results of a decision or that a task was completed.

Defining these for a particular task or decision creates a catalyst for conversation and a reference point for the future. The process typically takes the form of creating a matrix structure with the key steps/tasks in the columns and the key individuals/functions in the rows relevant to the issue being clarified. Here is a template:

	Step/Task 1	Step/Task 2	Step/Task 3	Step/Task 4	Step/Task 5
Person/Function 1					
Person/Function 2					
Person/Function 3					

A facilitator then leads the group (composed of relevant stakeholders) through the process of identifying the VARCI roles for each cell of the matrix. Once completed, the group evaluates the overall matrix to be sure that the individual decisions made make sense as a whole. The completed matrix is then communicated to the organization and used as a reference should questions or disagreements arise in the future.

This description of the VARCI tool and process is intended as an introduction. Having facilitated many of these sessions, there is both art and science in the selection of the specific area of focus, how the activities and players are defined, and how the VARCI role definitions should be interpreted in any given situation. You are strongly encouraged to reach into your network to find someone experienced in the use of this tool to help you customize it to your unique requirements.

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.

Written by Larry Solow