

Can Strategic Planning Unite a Divided Board?

For the third time in six months, a board meeting of the Seaside Community Foundation had degenerated into chaos. The discord began after the staff reports and continued to simmer during the approval of several new grants. It erupted full-force during a discussion of the final budget for the next fiscal year, which was just three weeks away.

The budget, which included two new staff positions and a move to larger office space, represented a major change for the young foundation. Several board members adamantly opposed any increase in the foundation's operating expenses. As usual, the discussion was animated.

Chairperson Antoinette Frazer fought to be heard above the fray. "I want to remind you that we have a motion and a second to approve the budget. We've been discussing it for 45 minutes without making any progress. Let's just vote."

Two of the ten board members abstained from the vote. A third voted against the budget. When it became apparent that the budget would be approved, a fourth board member gathered his papers, pushed back his chair, and walked out of the meeting, allowing the door to slam behind him. The room fell silent.

"If there's no other business, I move we adjourn," said Antoinette. Other murmured their agreement, and the meeting broke up. Most were in a hurry to leave. The clock read 10:50 p.m.; the meeting had been scheduled to conclude at 9:15.

Scott Goddard, one of the trustees who had abstained from the budget vote, walked down to the end of the table where Antoinette was talking quietly with Ed Herrera, the foundation's executive director. Antoinette and Ed paused as Scott approached.

"Tonight's meeting demonstrates what I've been saying for the past year," Scott said to both of them. "We need to do some strategic planning."

"I agree with you," said Ed, "but I'm not sure the rest of the board is convinced."

"I know I'm not," said Antoinette. "There's no way strategic planning will solve all our problems."

"I'm not saying it would fix everything," Scott replied, "But it might help us agree on what our mission is and what our priorities should be. It couldn't hurt. Look at what happened tonight!"

"I think it's a waste of money," Antoinette responded. "I don't think we need to pay some fancy consultant to come in and tell us things we already know. Knowing our board, we'd just spend the whole time arguing."

"Maybe that would help clear the air," Ed said with a smile.

Antoinette laughed, but then continued, "I'm serious about this, I serve on a lot of boards and I can't tell you how many retreats I've been on in the last five years. We go away somewhere, look at a bunch of overheads, and spend a lot of time writing with markers on big pieces of paper. Three months later, nothing has changed. I think it's the staff's job to prepare a strategic plan for the board to approve. The last thing our board needs is strategic planning."

"You know that I disagree," Scott said as he turned toward the door. "If you don't do something, you're going to start losing board members and community support. We're a young organization, and I don't think we can afford that. It's up to you and Ed to turn things around."

BUSINESS VOLUNTEERS UNLIMITED
Discussion Points for Case Study Facilitators

Can Strategic Planning Unite a Divided Board?

The players are:

Antoinette = chair; stands against strategic planning

Scott Goddard = trustee; abstained from budget vote; vocal on need for strategic plan to set mission and priorities

Ed = executive director; "not sure rest of board convinced" of value of strategic planning

1. *Is strategic planning needed in this case? What would it involve and what would be the value?*
 - THIS IS A YOUNG ORGANIZATION; AT A TURNING POINT IN EXPANDING BUDGET, STAFF, SPACE
 - NEED TO DO STRATEGIC PLANNING TO DETERMINE MISSION AND PRIORITIES PER SCOTT (THE TRUSTEE) – TO DETERMINE FOCUS AND HOW TO BEST USE FUNDS
 - WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE? RESEARCHING NEEDS OF COMMUNITY, EXTENT OF FUNDING THAT IS REALISTIC, AND DECISION ABOUT BEST USE OF FUNDS TO MEET NEEDS
 - WHAT IS VALUE? PLAN WILL PROVIDE BASIS FOR FUTURE CHOICES AND DECISIONS

2. *What can Ed do to begin engaging board members in considering issues of vision, mission and strategy? What can Scott do?*
 - ED IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: STAFF'S ROLE IS TO RESEARCH NEEDS, PROVIDE EXPERTISE, PRESENT OPTIONS OF PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AND ANALYSIS OF PROS & CONS & COSTS.
 - SCOTT IS TRUSTEE: CAN TALK WITH A FEW OTHER TRUSTEES AND ENGAGE THEM TO SERVE ON A STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE. TOGETHER THEY CAN APPROACH ANTOINETTE TO CONVINCHE HER OF THE IMPORTANCE AND OFFER THEIR TIME.

3. *Antoinette says it's the staff's job to do strategic planning. To what extent is this so? What is the board's role?*
 - STAFF'S JOB IS TO RESEARCH COMMUNITY NEEDS AND FUNDING POTENTIAL; TO PRESENT VARIOUS OPTIONS AND THEIR PROS & CONS (COSTS)
 - BOARD'S ROLE – TO DELIBERATE REGARDING COMMUNITY NEEDS, AND RESOURCES REQUIRED TO PURSUE VARIOUS PROGRAM OPTIONS; TO MAKE ULTIMATE DECISIONS ABOUT FUTURE OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS FOCUS AND THE BUDGET NEEDED.