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Helping Volunteer Boards Better Support Their Organizations

Volunteer Non-Profit (NP), Not-for-Profit (NfP), and Mission Driven Organization (MDO) Boards face unique challenges. [For convenience, we will refer to these three types as "Volunteer Boards" (VBs)]. They include:

1. Identifying the skills needed by Board members -- individually and as a group
2. Recruiting individuals who have the desired skills, knowledge, and background
3. Onboarding new members so they can contribute as quickly as possible
4. Helping Board members function most effectively as a team
5. Creating effective two-way communication and coordination processes between the Board, the organization's leadership, and its paid and volunteer members.

You might ask, "What makes these unique? Don't for-profit Boards struggle with the same issues?" Yes, they do -- and … (with the caveat that we are describing "typical" scenarios -- these could be different for any given organization) -- wrestle with these dynamics:

● Volunteers receive no stipend, nor compensation for their time or travel
● They are asked to make (sometimes significant) financial contributions to the organization as a condition of membership
● They are passionate about the mission of the organization, so they "step up" even though they may not have the right skills or experience
● They may know their organization extremely well, but may not have knowledge or experience of other Boards -- or business in general
● The quality of their contributions (except for their financial giving) is typically not assessed. There are no consequences for exceptionally good or bad performance.

In an upcoming series of articles, the authors will offer perspectives and tools to support non-profit leadership and Board Chairs in addressing the five issues identified above. Dr. Warren Wilhelm and Lawrence (Larry) Solow possess more than 50 years of combined experience in the fields of organizational learning, change, and effectiveness. Our intent is to bring our experience serving on and consulting to volunteer Boards and organizations to provide a multi-disciplinary approach to these issues.

Dr. Wilhelm served as Chief Learning Officer for AlliedSignal and has served on the Board of local Red Cross and YMCA organizations. He is the author of "Learning Architectures: Building Organizational and Individual Learning."

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