

# MOVING BEYOND RUBBER STAMPS AND CHEERLEADERS

A number of years ago, when I was serving as a local campus pastor, a retiring board member invited me out for coffee. She had served for six years, most of the time on the executive committee, one term as treasurer. She thanked me for asking her to serve on the board and said how meaningful the contacts were with students she had met. Then, as we were leaving, she paused and said, “You know what, after six years I still don’t get what being a board member is all about.”

Her honest appraisal caught me up short, and it has continued to haunt me over the years. We had a mentoring process in place. She was not a personal friend that I recruited; I had received her name from an area congregation. We did annual board evaluations. What did we miss? What might other board members be thinking about their own experiences?

My inbox is attracting a number of email questions recently about the functioning of campus ministry boards. Perhaps it’s the time of year when boards and staff are going through some kind of annual evaluation (hopefully). The concerns are stated something like this:

- “Our board spends a lot of time talking about planning and visioning, but when it comes to getting the work done, it always seems to fall to me (the campus pastor).”
- “Members of our board enjoy baking cookies for students during finals week, but they don’t seem to have the energy to work on the larger issues of the ministry, such as fund raising or interpretation.”
- “I’m a little worried that my board willingly goes along with whatever I as a staff person want to do. ‘You know best’, they say.”
- “The board chair ‘gets it,’ but everyone else defers to her when decisions are made.”
- “We don’t seem to ever carry through on our great planning. Everyone gets enthused, but then it falls apart because there is no one to carry out what we have dreamed—except me.”
- “Things are going pretty well right now. My board is made up mostly of my friends. What should I be aware of?”

First, I want to acknowledge that nearly everyone reading this article has related to boards that were “rubber stamps” or had some other general dysfunction, such as attrition or complacency. Perhaps we have experienced them as staff, even contributed to their malaise. But we “get by” with them without having to fix them or overhaul them to any major extent. It’s like a lot of folks here in the upper Midwest who drive “beater” cars during the winter months. It’s just something to get them by until the spring thaw or until they can afford something better. Rubber stamp boards help us to “get by.” They may not be very efficient or effective. They may even involve us in an organizational “wreck” at some point down the road. But for now we throw in another quart of oil and risk the possible wreck, just to get by for a few more months.

Rubber stamp boards happen for a number of reasons.

1. Their role or job description is not carefully defined. Members are recruited to be on the board with the sense that not a lot would be required of them.

2. They are friends and family, often quite literally. They took on the board role to be supportive, but not with the expectation that their work in that capacity would be evaluated or that hard decisions would be required of them.
3. They felt “fortunate” to serve where there is a very capable campus pastor who has been there for many years. This staff person “knows the ministry” and just needs the board to support their decisions.
4. The board does not have a larger vision of the ministry. They have not been asked to dream or plan. They spend all of their time and energy getting from one meeting to the next, often fretting with small details rather than working on major decisions.
5. The relationship between board members has not been defined. Often one or two “long-term” members make the decisions, leaving the rest of the members to acquiesce.
6. The synods, who often appoint board members, do not request or expect feedback from them in any meaningful way.

Boards generally do not set out to be rubber stamps. New members join enthusiastically. They have made a commitment to serve and they are willing to do just about anything to help the ministry move forward. Rubber stamping happens over time, as decisions are increasingly deferred to staff and more power is sapped from the energy core of the board. It is the road less traveled. It happens when someone says, “I’ll just do it; you don’t need to worry about it.” Or, “Let’s ask Mary what she would do; she’s been on the board for so long.” Or, “The campus pastor will get those bids for the new roof taken care of.” Before you know it, the board becomes a bunch of bobble-heads, nodding at decisions they have not grappled with and okaying results for which they have no responsibility.

Les Stahlke, president of Governance Matters, states in a recent article about rubber stamp boards, “A CEO (read campus minister) who wants to drive board decisions or who thinks the board is a ‘necessary evil’ does great disservice to the organization and is certainly abusing his/her power. In all four basic responsibilities, the board must: (a) design its own structure and processes; (b) direct the strategic plan; (c) delegate authority and responsibility to the CEO; and, (d) determine progress and measure results.”<sup>1</sup> His solution is to have the board spend time on the agenda discussing the role of the board and the role of the director. When this key relationship is understood, everyone will be happier, he says.

In a related article describing the “cheerleading board,” Stahlke notes the way in which a board that begins as “friends who want to be supportive . . . who agree to serve by helping you, not to give an outlet for their own expertise in the area of your own,” never makes it to a more mature stage without some serious understanding of their role as a governing board. They are like dependent adolescents who never grow up. They have some of the marks of maturity, but they never get there.

Stahlke writes, “Everything still depends on you. Your board is no less supportive than they have always been. Unfortunately for you, however, they are in no better position to take the organization forward without you. . . . You thought they would be able to take on the load of strategic planning, to search for and select the perfect successor, and to take the organization into the future without you, like a flywheel carrying the momentum of change. But they are still cheerleaders. They are definitely not a mature governing board.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.relationshipmodel.com/fb/articles/govproc/rubgov.aspx](http://www.relationshipmodel.com/fb/articles/govproc/rubgov.aspx), 4/9/2007

<sup>2</sup> [www.relationshipmodel.com/fb/articles/govstruc/cheerbrd.aspx](http://www.relationshipmodel.com/fb/articles/govstruc/cheerbrd.aspx) 4/9/07

Stahlke states that there are two necessary components that need to be in place. One is a statement of relationship between the board and the director, the other is the relationships between the board members themselves, between the board and its chair, and between the board and some other governing authority up the line, such as synods in our campus ministry structure. These are the relationships that so easily go undefined in an organization. There are assumptions about responsibilities, but never candid conversation or deliberate decisions. There may be a board manual, but it's not followed. Cheerleaders who enjoy their position seldom aspire to put on the pads and be players.

Healthy organizations are clear about lines of authority, limitations of staff and board, areas of responsibility, expectations and results, and accountability. There is a known process for determining how decisions are made and for how directives are to be carried out. There is regular evaluation—not to be punitive, but to learn from mistakes and false assumptions. Throughout the organization there is affirmation for work well-done, a strategic plan that makes everyone's contribution significant, and ways to empower leadership at all levels to take appropriate action.

As I consider the experience I shared at the beginning, I think that we missed it at the point of empowerment. As staff, we took too much responsibility from board members, hoping to make life less difficult and demanding for them. In doing so we also took away the challenge to plan and the rewards of work accomplished. We did not empower them. We thanked them for their stamps of approval, but then wondered why they didn't show up for the next meeting.

Someone has said that at every board meeting something should be at stake. There should be important reporting, significant planning, challenging visions, or earth-shaking decisions that must be made that require the active presence and participation of every board member. Empowerment, that's the key to turning around a rubber stamp board. How can that happen where you serve?