

Fire and Forest
Many Thanks to Boards
by Mike Esnard

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Recently, as a board was wrapping up business for the year, I felt a deep appreciation for everyone at the table. They are all volunteers, donating their time and energy to make sure that the organization is on the right track. They ensure that policies are consistent with the mission, and that budgets and balance sheets are carefully watched. They make sure that they understand basic activities, offer feedback or encouragement when they think it necessary, and just generally bring their focus and attention on a regular basis to the business. They take responsibility for its oversight, which is quite a gift.

I have the honor of serving on two boards, the Mountain Communities Fire Safe Council, and the Pine Cove Water District. MCFSC is a private non-profit corporation, while the Pine Cove Water District is a limited purpose government agency under California's special district law. The meetings have a different tone since the state's Brown Act binds PCWD but not MCFSC. Brown Act observance gives a more formal feel to the proceedings, but much of what happens is similar. The most basic activity is that the executive director or general manager reports to the board on activities, expenditures, and plans. Board members listen, ask questions, make comments, and accept or reject the reports.

The key balancing act for boards is to offer effective oversight and policy direction to management, but leave the actual work of management to them. Board members are sometimes tempted to take active roles in daily activities, and it never works out well when it happens. Experienced boards hold managers accountable, but support their role as managers with the authority to lead the staff in daily operations.

Of course one of the key responsibilities of boards is to make sure the top manager is good at their job, and both my boards are lucky to have

excellent managers who are great to work with: Edwina Scott, the executive director of MCFSC, and Jerry Holldber, general manager of PCWD.

A good board meeting involves good reports, good listening, and respect for everyone at the table. Board members are generally older, often retired, and their age has given them rich experience that can be very useful to the organization. Everyone brings something different, and it is often a pleasure when someone brings up some useful and germane piece of information that no one else knew.

The biggest issue that all board members need to learn is that the board can only act as a whole and must speak with one voice. No board member has any self-designated powers; all decisions must be made by a vote of the board. So another balancing act is each person bringing their own knowledge and experience to the board yet accepting that finally the decisions must be made by the group as a whole. Good decisions and good discussions involve individuals asserting their views but aiming towards shared understanding and unified action.

Of course it can go the other way, with long-term feuds and constant distrust. The PCWD board attended governance training in the fall and probably the thing that affected us most were the stories of other attendees who sit on truly dysfunctional boards. We came away thinking we were pretty fortunate.

So here is to all the directors sitting on governing boards of organizations. Thank you all for your valuable contributions to making our organizations work.