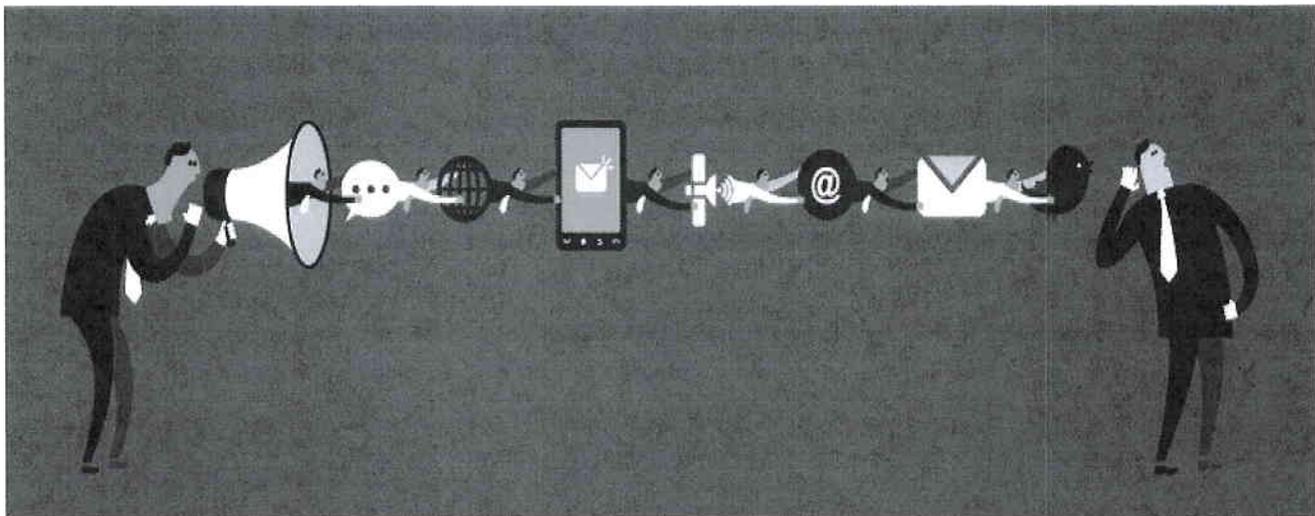


# Communicate Effectively to Create Better Board Relationships

Posted by **Hardy Smith** on Dec 15, 2016 1:07:46 PM

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Nonprofit leaders seeking to improve relationships with board members can start by focusing on being a good communicator.

What is the significance of good communication?

Whenever I ask audiences what they believe is the most essential element of a successful long-term relationship, they always cite communication as most important.

Communication has a direct influence on your organization's board member experience. It also impacts board member performance.

In my work to understand the frustration often associated with board engagement, I have found that poor communication is a top contributor to board members not performing as expected.

According to board members participating in my research, lack of good communication is a major pain-point that creates many of the issues affecting board and organization success.

Specifically mentioned complaints include flawed timing and the feeling of being misled. Board members express frustration about lack of information, being caught by surprise, and not being listened to.

## Trust

Causing this type of negative reaction may not be intentional, but it can have board members feeling like they're in a mushroom grow house – being kept in the dark and covered with manure!

Failing to communicate successfully undermines relationships and diminishes credibility. Is it reasonable to expect board members to work cooperatively with someone they don't feel positive about or whose reliability is questioned?

Make no mistake; these feelings affect trust. It's impossible to have a positive relationship with someone without trust.

## Quantity vs. Quality

You may feel your efforts to communicate with board members is more than adequate. But does an impressive level of activity mean it is effective? Understand that while frequency is important, quantity doesn't automatically translate into quality.

If your board members are not responding with desired results, consider the possibility that your communication techniques need improving.

Think of all of the interactions you have with board members involving some form of communication. Are they contributing to positive performance outcomes or inadvertently adding to the frustration of expectations not being met?

## Two Tips from a Top Communicator

Reading *What More Can I Say?* by communication expert Dianna Booher helped me appreciate the many fundamentals that go into being a successful communicator. Nonprofit leaders who want to be better communicators can employ two important tips from Dianna.

Listen for what's *not* said in a conversation or document.

"Why did the person *not* mention a particular topic? Why did the person *not* ask the next logical question? Why did the person skirt an issue when it would have been typical and reasonable to discuss the topic? Silence speaks volumes. Probe for under-the-surface information, feelings, or motivations to fully understand a situation."

Listen discriminately. Probe with questions to help draw conclusions about what you hear so you can make sound decisions.

Pay attention to these words of advice because they have another critical function. They point out how board members are judging the messages they're receiving.

Frequently the first communication transgression occurs during recruitment when a full explanation of duties is omitted in eagerness to get a yes from a board prospect. Board members who find out later about time commitments and fundraising expectations call this bait and switch.

BoardSource's own *Leading with Intent* research shows that many boards are missing an opportunity to establish good relationships by not properly orienting their members to their roles and responsibilities and to the organizations they serve. The study reports a lack of board member knowledge about their roles and responsibilities.

So who is responsible for providing that knowledge and when does it occur? If board members don't know what they're supposed to know, whose fault is that? It is organization staff who is responsible for information and timing.

In addition, it is the organization staff who is responsible for the delivery of information during the orientation process.

These two first-impression opportunities are priceless. If they are mishandled, chances for a positive bond are already being compromised.

## Action Steps

Here are six actions for turning communication from poor to positive and improving relationships with board members:

1. Be upfront in your recruitment process about expectations. For example, don't assume board prospects understand and accept that raising funds is a board responsibility.
2. Consider that people process information in different ways. Some may like spread sheets and charts while others may prefer people stories and pictures. When sending out documents, offer a choice of electronic and hard copy versions. Cookie cutter communication is easier, and attempting to meet individual communication preferences is certainly demanding, but the results are worth the effort.
3. Schedule the release of information to allow enough time for digesting important material. Advance distribution shows consideration for board members' busy schedules.
4. Appreciate the value of in-person communication. Often email, printed materials, reports presented to a group, and even telephone calls don't have the same impact as a one-on-one conversation.
5. Be aware of physical and psychological influences when interacting with others. Your body language, tone of voice, and choice of words all matter. So do theirs. When they answer, pay attention to their body language, tone of voice, and choice of words, all of which communicate what they are thinking. Understand that individual personality and generational differences directly relate to how your message is interpreted.

6. Remember the most important element of good communication is focused listening. Board members need to feel that their opinions are wanted and respected. Demonstrate that you're a good listener by being present in a conversation and actively acknowledging that the information you receive is understood and appreciated.

BoardSource has available a recorded webinar, "Improving Boardroom Communication," that provides additional guidance.

## Improving Communication Skills: An Ongoing Process

Effective communication takes commitment to an ongoing process that includes constantly seeking improvement to both technique and methodology of message delivery.

Continuously evaluate with your board to determine if the effectiveness of your communication is on target. Make sure you're avoiding mistakes that contribute to miscommunication. Ask board members for their suggestions for improving communications.

Being a good communicator will improve your leadership effectiveness, enhance relationships with board members, and increase overall performance of your board — and your organization.

Now that we've discussed several significant barriers to good communication and solutions to overcome them, consider what other influencers could enhance communication success with your board members?

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Hardy Smith is a consultant and speaker who works with nonprofits who want an ongoing culture of performance. His upcoming book, due in 2017, is devoted to answering this compelling question: Why don't board members do what they're supposed to do?