

**COMMUNICATING INNOVATION AND CHANGE TO THE BOARD**

**WSEP Ventures  
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**Summary of Ann Becker's Presentation:**

Before embarking on a major change initiative, you, as the leadership of the organization — whether board chair or executive director — need to do three things:

- 1. Assess the health of the board's relationships – among board members, and with key staff, particularly the executive director.**
- 2. Undertake the necessary preparatory work with the board.**
- 3. Consider how the proposed innovation/change will affect organizational accountability with respect to mission and money.**

*A. Assessing the health of the board's relationships – among board members, and with key staff, particularly the executive director.*

- With many boards, one often sees too much focus on structure and not enough on the quality of the relationships.
- Make sure everyone is clear on, and committed to, a common vision and goals.
- Pay attention to the tone of the board's relationships: Do written and verbal communications reflect trust, recognition of effort, and good will?
- Identify if any repair work needs to be done; is there anyone who needs attention or reassurance?

*B. Undertaking the necessary preparatory work with the board.*

- Remember that very few people like surprises.
- Get the support of your key stakeholders
- Decide what process would be most effective: A strategic planning session? A background paper to read and discuss? Individual meetings with certain board members (bearing in mind that some people are more comfortable with change than others)?

Preparatory work may take longer and be more involved than you think:

- It's important to remember that board members are not staff of the organization. It is up to leadership to bring them up to speed by reminding them of where the organization has come from and by putting the future in context.

- Adequate preparation may take more time, but it's also an opportunity to engage your board in meaningful, substantive dialogue and exciting strategic thinking. Rich and intellectually stimulating discussions about new initiatives can increase board members' commitment to the institution by reinforcing their pride in being part of the organization's "cutting edge" vision as well as reminding them of how they are adding value as board members.
- Ultimately you will have a better plan for your proposed change or innovation than what you started with.

*C. Consider how the proposed innovation/change will affect organizational accountability with respect to mission and money.*

Remember that ultimate organizational accountability rests in the board's hands. There are many things that a board can delegate, but accountability, the responsibility for maintaining the reputation and integrity of the organization, isn't one of them. For that reason, organizational leadership must be proactive in thinking and talking about how proposed innovation/change will impact organizational accountability, making sure that the house is in order regarding mission and money.

- Review mission statement and bylaws:
  - Are they clear?
  - What about your policies regarding conflict of interest?
  - What's the implication of the proposed change on these items?
- Review "the books":
  - Have you been seeing regular reports from staff, from the finance committee?
  - Are you conducting regular independent audits?
- Are board meetings "rubber stamp" events, or are they active, engaging, and exciting?
- Does everyone know his or her job?
  - Do you have current job descriptions for staff and regular compensation review?
  - Does the board have job descriptions?
  - Does each board member understand the skills, talents you need of them and that being on the board is not a "spectator sport"?
  - What are the implications of the change/ innovation for your human resources?

The above considerations are not unique to times of innovation and change. In fact, they are about the constants of good stewardship and healthy board dynamics. But without them, embarking on organizational change and innovation is at best difficult, painful, and extremely time consuming, and at worst, impossible.