



Freund Associates
Technical Communication

Why Volunteer Boards Fall Apart: 10 Lessons Learned in the Trenches

A White Paper by Dr. Annette S. Freund

Let's be honest. If you've ever served on a volunteer Board of Directors, you've probably experienced the best and worst of human behavior which, as you know, can be good, bad, and darn right ugly! For the past 30 years, I've served on numerous volunteer boards—from Faculty Senates to Chambers of Commerce. During this time, I've met some of the finest, most dedicated people in the world. I've also seen some of the worst organizational leaders on the planet—and learned from their mistakes. These are the 10 lessons I have learned in the trenches.

Lesson 1: Every Board needs a clear mission, purpose, history, and vision.

Before you raise your hand to serve on the Board, ask to see its mission statement. Look for it on the first page of the organization's bylaws or website. If it doesn't have a mission statement, abandon all hope for this Board. If it has one, then find out if it's being followed. Ask a few Board members if they know what it says. If they can't articulate the mission or purpose, then very likely they're not following it. Don't even think of joining a Board if the organization doesn't know why it exists, where it's been, or worse, doesn't care where it's going! The leaders are likely to have a "hidden agenda" or vision that differs from your own. Find another place to volunteer.

Lesson 2: Every Board needs an org chart, bylaws, and clear statement of roles and responsibilities.

Once you have determined the organization's mission and values, ask to see its org chart, bylaws, and statement of roles and responsibilities. If the Board has none of these,

I repeat: abandon all hope for this organization. If it has all of these, then find out if the bylaws are outdated, being followed, or being ignored.

Some critical questions to ask:

- What are the roles and responsibilities of officers, standing committees, and staff?
- Who appoints the committee chairs, and how do Board members get on these committees?
- To whom do the Executive Director and staff report?
- How much do they get paid, and who reviews their performance?
- Is the Board really the decision-making body?
- Or does the Board just rubberstamp the decisions of the Executive Director and staff?

Find out how work gets done. If you cannot get a straight answer (or don't like what you hear), find another place to volunteer. You won't be sorry.

Lesson 3: Every Board needs effective leadership.

No organization can function with a Board Chair who is a "Godzilla," or conversely, a "Casper Milk Toast." In the first case, the lack of tolerance for DIFFERENT points of view will destroy all trust and camaraderie. In the second case, tolerance for EVERY point of view, though helpful for communication, can bring decision making to a screeching halt. Both intolerance and indecision are toxic for volunteer Boards. To be effective, the Board Chair must be a mentor, not a tyrant or an indecisive leader, relying solely on the input of a few "inbred" friends to agree with



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what the Chair says. An effective Board Chair must be a respected peer—a team player who encourages different points of view, one who doesn't micromanage, delegates authority, and trusts that others will follow through. A strong team on the Executive Committee—empowered by the Board—can keep the power of the Chair in check or can get an indecisive Chair to act. An effective Executive Committee can also provide “the bench” or succession plan for future leaders. To help ensure continuity of leadership, the next Board Chair should be mentored by the current Chair and serve on the Executive Committee. Succession planning helps ensure that experienced and capable individuals will be prepared for leadership roles and responsibilities as they become available.

Lesson 4: Board members must demonstrate moral courage.

The individuals who serve on volunteer Boards are seldom engaged in the day-day-operations of the organization, nor do they want to be. These responsibilities are usually assigned to the Executive Director who may or may not wield a giant stick! I have served on Boards that were quite content with this arrangement because Board members really weren't interested in doing any “heavy lifting” for the organization, preferring instead to follow the leader, like sheep, and avoid conflict. This “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” behavior can have devastating consequences. If key responsibilities are controlled by the Executive Director, there can be no balance of power. I have witnessed entire boards controlled by Executive Directors who have ignored unethical behavior, rejected transparency, and even misused funds. And Board members, out of fear or indifference, did nothing! To be effective, a volunteer Board must have moral courage—the courage to take action for moral reasons despite the adverse consequences. The best volunteer

Boards are those whose members aren't afraid to speak up and, when presented with unethical behavior, have the moral courage to take action.

Lesson 5: Board members must be open to change.

Rigid leaders—incapable of adapting to new ideas, new information, or changing times—can destroy volunteer Boards. When you first volunteered, you probably hoped that you could make a difference. No doubt you were eager to present your ideas, make suggestions for improvement, and help move the organization forward, right? Instead, were your suggestions rejected even before you had a chance to explain them fully? Were you treated like an outsider? Or made to feel as though you were trespassing on someone else's territory? Unfortunately, territorialism is all too common in volunteer organizations. People with low self-esteem often hold on stubbornly to their roles or titles because it's the one thing that makes them feel important. And, unless they resign (or you are a very good lobbyist), you aren't likely to get them out of office. To be effective, volunteer Boards must not only listen, but also RESPOND to new ideas, new members, and potential new leaders. If not, members won't feel as though they are being heard or valued at all. Handled properly, brainstorming sessions can help cultivate new ideas, engage new members, identify new leaders, and help build consensus. Most important, they can help volunteer organizations create a less rigid and more relaxed atmosphere—one that shows you value new ideas and are open to change.



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Lesson 6: Board members must be held accountable.

If your organization doesn't send out an agenda before each Board meeting, then be prepared to have your time wasted. Likewise, if your meetings take longer than two hours, examine the reasons why. No one appreciates dull, boring, unproductive meetings. Whether you serve on the Board or on a committee, you need to hold your leaders accountable for their performance, in particular the way they handle meetings, since this is the most direct way they interact with members. Who evaluates the officers and committee chairs? Who evaluates the organization's Executive Director and staff? A real warning sign for a dysfunctional Board is lack of accountability. If the Board members aren't really "minding the store," and you have no procedures to prevent misuse of authority, don't be surprised if you have trouble recruiting or keeping Board members. Poor leadership—and lack of accountability for it—can reduce your membership faster than you can control the exodus.

Lesson 7: Board members must be appreciated.

Gratitude is formally defined as "a feeling and expression of thankfulness for the efforts of others that are costly to them and beneficial to us." What's most costly and valuable to volunteers? It's their TIME. Don't waste it; cherish it. Say "thank you" publicly and often. Small gestures of recognition and encouragement can go a long way to keep volunteers motivated, feeling happy, useful, valued, and loved. Effective Boards understand the importance of giving special awards or "certificates of appreciation" to top performers. Not only do recognition awards provide positive reinforcement and incentive for others, but they also bring the top-level managers and volunteers together. Moreover, recognition

ceremonies can provide positive, "good news" stories for your organization in the press and help enhance your Board's image and reputation.

Lesson 8: Top-level managers must resolve conflicts.

One of the least favorite responsibilities of being in charge is conflict resolution. When conflict goes unresolved, teamwork breaks down. To keep your organization working effectively, this downward spiral must be stopped as soon as possible, and stopping it often requires involving top-level managers as "peacemakers." To begin, the Board must designate a respected person in authority as the "peacemaker" or arbitrator. This person could be a former President, the Board Chair, a local official, an impartial legal advisor, or even a tribunal of several impartial individuals unless, of course, one or more of these individuals is directly involved in the dispute and would have a conflict of interest. After both sides of the conflict are presented, the disputing parties must abide by the arbitrator's decision; otherwise there can be no conflict resolution. If your organization has no grievance process or even a simple conflict resolution process, I urge you to get one in place—sooner than later. If not, your Board's problems could develop into a full-blown mutiny! Having experienced a Board mutiny firsthand, I can assure you that you don't want to let that happen. An organization that fails to resolve conflict is doomed. To be effective in resolving conflicts, your Board must have a conflict resolution process in place, plus a healthy respect for the individuals who enforce it.



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Lesson 9: Committee responsibilities must be clear, fair, and reasonable.

Have you ever served on committees where the chairs never rolled up their sleeves? Or one committee seemed to do everything? Or worse, YOU were the person doing everything? In my experience, “do-everything committees” are just as ineffective as “do-nothing committees” for several reasons: (1) burnout is inevitable because the output cannot be sustained, (2) the skills of some volunteers are underutilized, and (3) initial enthusiasm turns into resentment. “Do-nothing committees” can have an equally devastating impact: (1) Volunteers lose respect for the committee chair, (2) lack of respect leads to poor attendance, and (3) poor attendance leads to the death of the committee. In my experience, the most effective committees were those led by example and collaboration, not by self-promotion and delegation. Sharing committee tasks equally—including the Committee Chair—helps build teamwork and camaraderie. As a Board Chair, one of the most effective recruitment tools I ever developed was a committee signup sheet that clearly outlined the roles and responsibilities of each committee, including WHO chaired it, WHAT tasks it performed, WHEN and WHERE it met, WHY volunteers might want to join it, and HOW to sign up. If your Board doesn’t have a clear description of the roles and responsibilities of each committee, get on it. When committee responsibilities are clear, fair, and reasonable, everyone benefits. What’s more, boosting committee membership could be your legacy to the organization!

Lesson 10: Boards must invite feedback to improve performance.

The late Ed Koch, outspoken Mayor of NYC from 1978-1989, was famous for his question, “How am I doing?” Every Board should be

asking a similar question, “How are we doing?” Unfortunately, most Boards have no formal or informal reporting mechanism. Neither do most Boards have a way to share past experiences with present volunteers—experiences that could spare them from making the same mistakes. Instead, the same issues keep recurring, and the same conflicts often go unresolved from one term to the next. To be effective, your Board needs a way to gather feedback, seek advice from others, reflect on it, and make improvements. Poor attendance at Board meetings, for example, is a red flag, and you definitely should be asking the question, “How are we doing?” To begin, I recommend meeting with some of your past and present Board members to share their experiences. Using their feedback and suggestions, develop a “Board Improvement Strategy” with measurable objectives, action steps, and a timeline. The time you spend actively listening to experienced Board members—and finding ways to help improve performance—may be the single most important thing you do to prevent your volunteer Board from falling apart.

About the Author

Dr. Annette S. Freund is the Owner and Managing Director of Freund Associates Technical Communication in Mahwah, NJ. She holds a doctorate in English from SUNY Albany and was a tenured Associate Professor at SUNY Rockland. She has combined her teaching and marketing skills as a volunteer on many Boards—in the private and public sector, for adults and youth.

Is your volunteer Board falling apart?

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