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Association Altimeter

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I spend a lot of time on airplanes traveling to association and chamber meetings. Soon after takeoff the captain announces, “We have reached 32,000 feet, the ride should be smooth up here.”

At a high altitude there is less drag. The plane is more efficient requiring less fuel. There is less turbulence. Routing can be more direct.

Like the captain, when I’m addressing boards, I remind directors their efforts are more efficient at higher levels where they can soar. At lower levels they will be distracted by squirrel chases and rabbit holes.

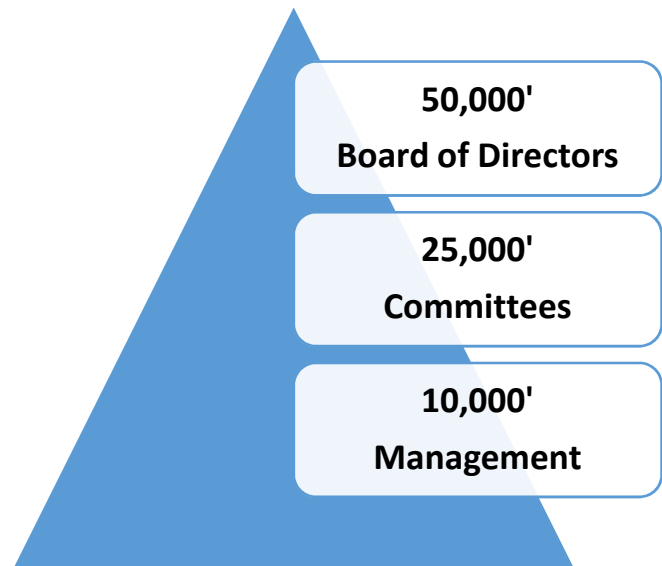
Gaining Altitude

Through the orientation process I explain an important concept: The role of the board is to govern. The role of the staff is to manage. It takes a partnership.

For a performance metric I reference the board working best at 50,000 feet.

Inevitably, as a board meeting progresses directors may realize conversation have taken a dive. They might say, “I know, you told us we should be at 15,000 feet or something like that.” It’s hard to sustain the altitude of 50,000 feet. They forget.

Even I have been called out on the level at which I was addressing an issue. I respect the direct who politely said, “Bob, at what level are you addressing this topic?” He was saying, “You’re in the weeds.”



There are boards that prefer to “keep both feet on the ground.” It is their way to avoid risks and take no chances on programs and services.

“Boards that operate at 50,000 feet have blue skies and opportunities they can address, allowing the staff to manage any association turbulence at lower levels. It is during the

landing that board and staff efforts meet and coordinate the success,” says Barbara Kemmis, CEO at the Cremation Association of North America.

Here’s the association altimeter describing the preferred levels for the work of board, committees and staff.

50,000’ – The level of board work. It is charged with governing the corporation. Directors should focus on protecting and making best use of resources, serving stakeholders and advancing the mission and strategic plan.

25,000’ – The level of committee work. Committees supplement the work of the board, from where they receive assignments and charges. They are encouraged to solve problems and plan programs.

10,000’ – The level at which staff take care of the details. It is administrative work. They are carrying out assignments or supporting committees and the board at that level.

Acrophobia

Acrophobia is the fear of height. It should never apply to governance.

Some directors seem to have a fear of height. A few directors get airsick if they work at a high level.

There are some boards that wrongly delve into administrative details. The purpose of a board is to govern and guide, not to micromanage details.

If they cannot reach and sustain altitude they tend to dive into the work of committees and staff. Here are two recent examples.

What’s for Lunch?

A board wanted to improve member competency and consumer confidence. They agreed to fund quarterly educational workshops. The motion passed, noting that it would be assigned to a committee and implemented by staff.

Then someone went into the weeds with the statement “I think we’ll get better attendance if we cater lunch.” Another director added, “I prefer that we offer a choice of at least two entrees.” An example of the board doing the committee’s work.

Misguided Mission

Another example concerns the mission statement. The board said it “seemed disjointed” and wanted to make it more appealing to stakeholders.

They wanted to remove the phrase “a nonprofit organization” because it was implied by the name. The second concern was a reference to the categories of members in the statement.

A motion was made to remove the words “affiliates and associates.” That’s when the conversation took a dive.

“If we remove the membership categories people won’t know they can join.” And, “Without identifying the categories we won’t know what to put on their convention name badges.”

The conversation stayed in the weeds for 25 minutes until a seasoned director said, “This is silly, there is no connection between our mission and convention name badges.”

Landing the Plane

Unless the board “lands the plane” at their envisioned destination, their work has minimal value. While programs can be developed right up to 99 percent completion, it is the last 1 percent effort that lands the plane.

I am looking forward to meeting Alex Sheen at the annual conference of the Florida Society of Association Executives. He is the founder of the movement, “Because I said I would, a promise made, a promise kept.”

He promotes accountability and commitment in a world where it is too easy to blame circumstances, technology, and other factors. “Sorry, I forgot.” “Something came up.” “My phone was dead.”

Accountability and follow-through applies to volunteers, too. Members and stakeholders expect board meetings to produce results. Kicking responsibilities down the road to the next board, or talking about it without doing it, does not “land the plane.”

"This breaks down the board, committee and staff roles with easy to understand concepts. I feel like Bob is that baseball coach that can tell immediately what's wrong with my swing and help set my focus back on track with his articles and advice," says Curtis Picard, CAE, CEO of Retail Association of Maine.

In summary, a board of directors has a duty to be visionary and advance the mission, as described by law and in governing documents. If they don't gain the necessary altitude or don't land the plane, the expected outcomes may not be achieved.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.