

Creating a Single Voice: The Prerequisite to Board Leadership

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IF YOUR BOARD is to make authoritative decisions—if it is to lead—then on a given issue it must have a single voice. The strength of this single voice arises from the diversity of viewpoints and intentions you and other board members bring to the board, as well as from the way the board focuses this multiplicity into unity. In this article, I'll explain how to do this.

Let's begin with an obvious point. Terry, Sara, Juanita, and Lindsey—or whatever your board members are named—are just themselves until they speak as a group. When they do this, something occurs that's both magic and commonplace: It is not these individuals who have spoken, but the city council, school board, hospital board, or board of regents on which they sit. In other words, your governing board—as opposed to any other group of individuals—exists only because of *corporate* reality. Invisibly, the corporate organization shapes the several individuals into a single, artificial organism.

Threats to Unity

Often the legitimate group voice is usurped, however. You have seen boards whose chairperson or loudest member somehow presumes individual ownership of the board's voice. You have probably also encountered a committee of the board that wields power as if it were the full group. You might have seen board members individually instructing staff. Sometimes the individuals are officers, such as the treasurer, and sometimes the committees are officers as a group, such as the executive committee. It is quite

common for executive committees to acquire for themselves virtual board authority, though finance, program, or planning committees often do so as well.

The original simplicity has been lost—the principle that the board speaks only as a group—and with it the basis for effectiveness and leadership. Something has gone awry. Now, it seems the board has several voices. If you were the chief executive, whom would you listen to: to the chairperson? to the executive committee? to the finance committee? to the personnel committee? to the treasurer? to the program committee? to the chairpersons of these committees? to the individual board members who, due to intellect, decibels, or persistence, have the strongest influence on others? or to the board as a whole—*though how would you know what that is?*

If you have any political savvy at all, you will listen to every one of them. But you will learn to assess where the real power lies and give that source particular attention.

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Power centers change, so you will have to be watchful and ready to shift your attention and your loyalties. It's a high-stakes game, for as chief executive you can ill afford to miscall the next shift in power. If you are really slick, you will "guide" the various groups and individuals so that, taken as a whole, they establish fewer conflicting

expectations. You will learn to do your guiding carefully so that your behavior is not recognized as the benevolent manipulation that it is.

Oh-oh. I have just described what most nonprofit and public chief executives would recognize as ordinary. It goes with the territory. Most board members *believe* that the board should speak with one voice but have come to accept a state of affairs in which the *pluribus* has a more commanding presence than the *unum*.

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And by the way, did you notice how fatiguing and distracting that list of CEO quandaries can be? Have you ever calculated the cost in CEO leadership lost while playing that kind of board-induced game? When the board table is merely a pulpit for articulating individual desires and judgments, a board has evaded its responsibility

ity to work *as a board*. Much of the CEO's energy must take up the slack—an expensive and unhealthy undertaking, indeed. Remember, too, that multiple sources of instruction are always accompanied by multiple sources of judgment. The CEO and staff are subjected to shifting and often contradictory standards of performance.

Voice of Unity and Leadership

Unless a board masters the art of speaking as a group, it has little power to lead. A board speaks with one voice . . . or it doesn't speak at all. Yet most nonprofit and public boards in my experience fail to speak with an unambiguous, single voice.

The problem is, though much talk goes on, groups have a very hard time speaking! As individuals, we communicate all the time. I can usually tell what you are saying, just as you can usually tell what I am saying. But how can you tell what a *group* is saying?

Creating a Single Voice

You could, of course, try to identify a group voice by listening to the interchange among board members. Indeed, individual board members and the CEO regularly form impressions of their colleagues' positions this way. But these idiosyncratic impressions are a risky way to interpret board will. Moreover, the group deserves to control its own expression rather than to be "interpreted." Fortunately, it is an easy matter for a group to state its will simply by taking a vote. Voting imparts a voice to the group that is different from a collection of individual voices.

Recognizing this single group voice by no means presupposes unanimity among the individual voices. They need not agree. In fact, if board members continually agree, they are not all needed. Their obligation to bring multiple views to the table is so great that polite agreement can be an abuse of responsibility. Individual dissenting board members must, however, support the proposition that staff are to follow the group voice rather than their own.

Of course, individuals can still speak, just as they did before. Nothing inherent in the board situation keeps them from exercising their previous freedom. But when individuals speak as individuals, they speak in a capacity they had prior to and irrespective of the board, which is to say, with no organizational power at all.

Your board as a body, then, is obligated to protect its staff from board members as individuals. The mechanics to realize the appropriate wholeness are simple:

1. The board says in writing that the CEO is responsible to the board *only* for decisions it has made as a body.
2. The board resolves that the CEO is bound to honor only *written* board expectations. In the Policy Governance model, these expectations are in the form of ends policies and executive limitations policies.
3. The board permits no fragmentation of its voice. For example, its various committees do not speak *for* the board, but *to* the board.



FAQ

How can a board ensure that it speaks as a whole?

No chairperson, executive committee, or other interpreter can “cover” for the board’s failure to speak.

4. In evaluating its CEO, the board *never* makes a judgment on any criterion the board as a full body did not explicitly set.

Under these conditions, individual members can readily give advice, because no one will confuse advice with instruction. By the same token, meddling can be safely deflected by staff, for the board itself will have confirmed that anything less than the board’s voice is simply the voice of individuals.

Some Final Tips on Avoiding Trouble

Neither governance nor management can be excellent when the staff works for a boardroom full of bosses. Speaking with one voice will prevent that. But the upshot is that nothing now lets your board off the hook for saying what it needs to say. No chairperson, executive committee, or other interpreter can “cover” for the board’s failure to speak.

FAQ →

What is the CEO’s role in support of the board speaking with one voice?

The CEO has a responsibility to be supportive of the board’s new resolve. At the least, the CEO should not sabotage the board’s beginning efforts to speak with one voice. For example, the chief executive must take the risk that the board truly means what it says and that he or she will not be held accountable for remarks or expectations voiced—however loudly or pointedly—by individual board members. The CEO *must* stop trying to please indi-

vidual members and committees, focusing instead on pleasing only the board’s mandates. Acting otherwise seduces the board back into old ways.

Further, the chief executive must instruct staff that board members are owed only courtesy and are given no special voice in the organization. That will not be easy at first for the municipal department head who is phoned by a member of council. Nor will it be easy for the nonprofit agency finance director who is approached by an accountant who sits on the board. It is the CEO’s task to instruct and support staff members in the new relationship with board members.

But while the chief executive and staff should not make the board’s task more difficult, they do *not* bear responsibility for the board’s discipline. That responsibility must be owned by the board itself, or else board leadership is oxymoronic. Having accepted that obligation, your board’s most useful tactic is to instruct the chief executive to be deaf to all board utterances except those expressed by a successful vote.

For Board Discussion

- Do your board members ever instruct staff or interpret what the board “really meant”? Is the chief executive ever expected to respond to a board member’s “I think we need a report on . . .” statement?
- Does your board ever hold the CEO accountable for something the board never took a vote on?
- Are staff members held accountable to please board committees (without the board having “budgeted” some amount of staff support for such committees)? Is your board irritated by the idea of formality (taking a vote) in expressing its voice? Ask your chief executive if he or she is ever confused about just what the board’s one voice is.