

Mission Centered Board Leadership
“Helping Board Members Build Passion for Mission”

Mark R. Fisher

The best way to build passion for mission is to strengthen the board members relationship and understanding about the people your agency serves. I have developed a tool called the “Four Stages of Compassion” as a way of establishing the level of a board members interest in your clients. The greater level of compassion a board member experiences, the stronger his/her performance will be in the key functions of governance, giving, ambassadorship and consulting. The following is a recap of the “Four Stages”

Stage One: (Recognition of Need)

People see others with needs and feel discomfort about their condition. They are not thinking so much about themselves but rather about others. This is the beginning of a movement to do something or stay in place recognizing a need but rationalizing the position of non-action.

Stage Two: (Moved to Help)

After a person or people in need are identified, there is movement in their direction. This movement might be physical or emotional. The point is that in Stage Two, people are not running away from an individual/group in need or dismissing an apparent condition, but rather are heading toward that person. In this stage an individual might make a token donation or provide a volunteer service.

Stage Three: (Being There)

The person either becomes physically present in the life of the individual or finds that he/she is more significantly in their thoughts. In addition, people become much more knowledgeable about the needs of those identified. In a spiritual sense they “give birth” to the individual within their thoughts. They begin to value more and more the life of the person/people served and become willing to take certain risks on their behalf.

Stage Four: (Providing Service)

The individual provides unearned help to the other in need. This service can be seen through voluntary efforts or charitable giving. In either case at Stage Four, the person is beginning to invest a much more significant level of time, thought, and possibly financial support. The Stage Four experience becomes a form of sacrificial giving.

A few years ago I was serving an organization that was planning a substantial expansion of services to the homeless. One of the board members was very challenged by the plan for growth. He was a retired banker, deeply gifted in financial analysis and focused on the various dimensions of managing risk.

He was a critical voice and vote in moving forward with this project. No matter how much we tried to explain the program and plans he just couldn't get on board. He wanted guarantees that everything would work as stated. Finally I said, “Bob, I have been studying the issue of ‘mission drift’ and have put together a simple benchmark process called the ‘Four Stages of Compassion.’ This is a way to help a board member determine to what extent she/he is identifying with mission and the people an organization serves.”

Bob listened to my explanation and responded, “I know exactly my problem; I'm stuck at Stage Two.” We continued with our conversation and he determined that the best

way to move forward would be to spend some time with the people who would ultimately be served as well as talk to some of the staff. A few months later he was able to understand the vision and find a level of comfort and support for the idea of moving forward. In short, he began to more closely identify with the people who were served and modified his understanding of risk.

This board member did not leave his expertise outside of the organizations four walls, but rather found a way to adapt it to help the agency move forward with its mission. It was a difficult and sometimes painful process but one that allowed this organization to grow. The challenge in all of this is to find a way to create a new mission-centered context within any decision making process.

What follows are recommendations for how organizations might strengthen the compassion level of their boards.

Establish a plan to give board members and candidates an opportunity to visit with some of the people an organization serves.

Every organization will differ in how this takes place but it will be important that all board and prospective board members are given the opportunity to learn about the people the organization serves. These contacts could take place through one-on-one meetings, group gatherings, or presentations at board meetings. In addition, written profiles on individuals served should be regularly shared with board members.

Position the “Four Stages of Compassion” as a self-assessment tool for board members and prospective candidates.

Establish a questionnaire that creates an opportunity for the board member to process her/his reflections concerning the people who are served. These questions can also become potential agenda items for discussion within board and committee meetings as well as retreats:

- 1) What do you know about the people we serve?
- 2) How important is it for you to become involved in helping the people we serve?
- 3) Have you spent time with some of the people we serve? What did you find out?
- 4) If you have not spent time with the people we serve, are you willing to do so?
- 5) What are the greatest needs of the people we serve?
- 6) Of the people you have met, who has touched you the most?
- 7) Are you willing to give your time to help fulfill our mission? If so, how much time per month might you be willing to invest? (Board meetings, study time, introducing others to the organization, etc.)
- 8) Are you willing to make an annual gift to the agency that would equal one of your top three-five charitable contributions for the year?
- 9) Would you be willing to make decisions for organizational growth that might have an impact on the amount of time or financial support you provide the organization?
- 10) How important is your role/service to the fulfillment of the mission?

After these questions have been answered, the executive director of the organization should conduct one-on-one meetings with board members and candidates to discuss their answers and determine appropriate next steps. When looking specifically at the issue of recruitment, it is recommended that the process be deliberate, creating a few

volunteer opportunities with ample time for reflection and discussion. It will be important that the potential board member move forward with a real commitment to help fulfill the mission of the organization.

Create a process that reconfirms the board member's commitment to the mission of the organization and the people it serves.

Use the first two chapters of the book "Mission Centered Board Leadership" as tools that will help the board member process his/her commitment. This will also be helpful to board members becoming more involved as ambassadors (introducing others) to the organization. Questions asked within this tool might be:

- 1) Why did you initially become involved in the work of the organization?
- 2) How did you initially become involved?
- 3) How have you been affected personally by the experience?
- 4) How do you personally identify with the people the agency serves?
- 5) What is your favorite story concerning one of the people the organization serves?
- 6) How has your involvement with the organization influenced your life?

Answers to these questions become the board member's personal story as to why he/she has become involved within the organization. These are stories that will ultimately empower the board member to communicate mission to others. The executive director should serve as a facilitator to the board members, helping them find ways of articulating the answers to these questions. As board members begin to internalize the needs of the people that are served, they will naturally cast a stronger sense of vision within their respective communities about mission. In doing so, the board member will stimulate a cultural/societal transformation that begins to focus more on issues of mission fulfillment.

Develop agendas for board meetings that spend significant time discussing mission and the people that are served.

The first step in this process would be to analyze the percentage of time that is spent in each board meeting talking about issues focused on finance and fundraising. A goal should be established to target as much as 75% of the time at board meetings on issues related to mission. These discussions are based on various aspects of the organization that will educate and motivate all board members to fulfill the governance, giving, ambassadorship, and consulting functions of their positions. One week before each board meeting, the agency should mail/email to its members the agenda as well as all of the study material and reports that will be referred to during the meeting. If the organization has a two-hour board meeting, the agenda might have the following elements.

By continuing to think about mission your board members passion for the fulfillment of it, the organization will never stray from its intended purpose. Over time the community will understand your work more clearly and become that much more attracted to what you are trying to do.

About Mark R. Fisher

Mark is dedicated to helping a variety of organizations answer the question, “How do we build a community of compassion?”

The focus of his practice has come from a lifelong experience of working with volunteers, donors and staff. He began to realize that the similarities between each of the participants of an organization were more significant than the differences. “By building unity between volunteers, donors, staff and care receivers our ability to achieve full potential increases.”

His counsel has helped raised nearly \$750,000,000 in private support and generated thousands of stories in the media. Mark earned his doctorate from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan with a dissertation entitled, “Compassion in Board Decision Making.” He has been a guest speaker and presenter at numerous conferences and has served on a variety of non-profit boards. He is the author of *Mission Centered Board Leadership* which can be purchased on his web-site, www.markrfisher.com.

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