

7 Questions to Help Strengthen Your Church Board

by Dan Reiland

Some church boards function like your worst nightmare and others genuinely seem like a beautiful dream come true. The interesting thing is that there are few church boards between those two rather extreme options. Very few ministers tell me “My board is just okay.”

The better grasp and implementation you have of the following seven questions the more likely your board will function like a dream come true.

1) What is the purpose of the board?

In the most classic sense, the board helps plan for the future by confirming direction and major strategy. This may be an active role alongside the senior minister or it may be a responsive role to the vision and direction of the senior minister. Either way, it should be an engaged and active role.

2) Who sets the agenda?

Having a well thought through written agenda is vital to a productive meeting. Showing up unprepared and “going around the table” giving each board member an opportunity to speak what’s on their mind to any topic, is likely waste of time and possibly a nightmare in the making. Board members can contribute to the agenda, but only in advance of the meeting and via an agreed upon process.

The process for setting the agenda most commonly resides with the board president. As mentioned above, board members can contribute to the agenda, but the president along needs the freedom to set the final agenda.

3) How are decisions made?

Few things are more important than how decisions are made. Hopefully you will avoid the extremes. On one extreme, the senior minister becomes the defacto benevolent dictator and on the other side, a minority of board members (or just one) push through decisions they argue for. Neither system is truly healthy.

In a healthy organization, the decisions are made according to what is best for the vision of the church, not favoring any one person’s personal preference. Even that is complicated, because what is “best” for the church can be subjective.

Therefore, teamwork, unity, and a sense of strong esprit de corps is essential. Mutual voluntary collaboration with one another is central to a healthy and effective decision-making process. Strong opinions are fine, but if each person keeps the mission and vision of the congregation front and center, conflict will be greatly minimized.

4) How are disputes settled?

Every person on your church board is a human being. No matter how mature or how good of leaders, there will be times of disagreement. **Don't avoid conflict, the important skill is the ability to resolve the conflict.** Further, the measurement of an effective board in terms of conflict resolution is that when conflict returns, it is about something new, (not an old issue), and you are able to resolve it quicker.

If the amperage of any issue becomes so great that the board gets stuck or polarized, it's time to take it off line. By that I mean that one or two board members will take some time outside the board meeting to talk things through to resolution. Start by agreeing on the mission, values and that the main goal is not to win, but to advance the mission of the church. If resolution can't be found, you may need to bring in an outside arbitrator. The point is to keep the conflict away from official board meeting. It may require a frustrated or angry board member to take some time off from the board until unity is regained.

5) What is the structure for the board and staff members to work together?

In smaller churches it can be a power struggle to determine who leads the church, the board or the staff. In larger churches, that issue is usually resolved, but larger churches still often struggle from poor communication between board and staff. In either case, clarity of roles is essential.

There is more than enough for both groups to do! You will want to write your own list, but it can look something like this:

Role of Board Members:

Affirmation of the vision; Direction / affirmation of values and big picture ministry direction, with the Senior Pastor.

Determine pace (of initiatives, large expenditures, policy and program changes) and the values underlying on which changes are implemented.

General oversight (big picture only) of church revenue and budget, and major capital projects.

Act as discerning partners with the senior minister: e.g. theological, political, social and community issues and public position on key issues.

Ask productive questions and serve to be a provider of solutions.

Decision making responsibility for major business and property matters of the church.

Serve as ambassadors for the general ministries of the church and lead with a positive influence in the congregation. Show up, participate, be visible.

Role of Staff Members:

Responsible for morale, momentum, and culture of the church.

Carry the day to day leadership of all church functions.

Decision-making responsibility for daily ministry committees, staff and operational issues.

Responsible for unity in thought for practical expression of theological issues in ministries of worship, education, music, social justice and other missions.

Design and implementation of church ministries.

Selection and hiring (and dismissal) of all staff (except the senior minister).

Budget design and day to day management of budgets (approved annually by Elders).

Creative design and execution of all worship services.

Leadership development of the staff and congregation.

Note: In a smaller church these roles and responsibilities are a little more shared with staff and board, but as the church grows, these two lists can serve as an idea template to follow as you delineate responsibilities.

6) How do you measure effectiveness?

There are several measurements by which you can test your church board's effectiveness. If you are a denominational church, there are certain accountabilities that come from your overseer. Those accountabilities are very helpful. In our case, for example, as part of the **Wesleyan Church**, we have a District Superintendent that stays in touch with our senior pastor and matters of our board.

For your internal measurements, you can use these kinds of questions:

Do all board members pursue a deepening relationship with the larger faith (denominational home) community?

Does the board as a team, fully agree upon and aggressively pursue the mission of the church?

Does the board set aside their own agendas for the good of the church and the unity of the group?

Is the church growing?

Is the revenue of the church keeping up with the budget needs?

Is the board always asking what the church should look like in 5 – 10 – 15 years?

Is the board accurately aware of the reputation of the church in the community?

Does the board celebrate large and small victories in the church such as participation in justice projects, outreach efforts and new members?

7) How are your board members selected?

Again, if you are denominationally connected you may have by-laws and general governance policies you must follow. In that case follow them, and hopefully you are given discretion to use wise leadership to trump a rule if ever needed.

If at all possible, avoid a popularity contest. Politics in the local church is a damaging

proposition to say the least. Set a standard by which each candidate is evaluated. Conduct an interview focusing on why the person wants to be on the board. Personally, I have found that a good rule of thumb to follow is:

“If the person really wants to be on the board, they probably shouldn’t be.”

A limited term of service is a great idea if possible. A top-notch board member can always come back on the board after a year or two off. The difficulty is how to remove a board member “gone bad” if you have no term limits.

Hopefully you won’t have to do that, but two things are needed just in case. The first need is a system by which you can release a board member, and second, is the courage by which to actually do it. Don’t wait until you need to release a board member to set up the system, design it and have your board ratify it now while it’s not needed.

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