



Management Support Unit (MSU)



Information Sheet 6:

Ensuring a productive relationship between Board Members and the Executive Officer

“in the conventional view of third-sector organisations, the board is the all-powerful group that establishes the mission, sets the objectives, appoints the staff and monitors their performance...In practice the reverse is sometimes nearer the truth...Not only does the staff control the board, it frequently plays a significant role in determining its membership...So the perception of the board as the centre of power is frequently far removed from reality. In practice many boards are more dependent on their staff than the staff is on the board. But this need not be the case. Some boards perform a leadership function. They add value to the organisation by steering, anticipating and providing wisdom and good judgement. They are concerned with the vision of the organisation, its values and culture and its achievements”¹

It has been said that the most important decision any Board can make is the appointment of their Executive Officer. However it is not uncommon for there to be some management issues that can cause friction between Board management and senior staff.

For example boards might complain that:

1. Important decisions that should be made by the committee as a whole has been made between meetings, with the committee simply rubber stamping
2. Inadequate information provided when decisions need to be made
3. Time is wasted on unimportant agenda items
4. Long-standing management practices are inaccessible especially to new committee members

To ensure that Board members and executive officers establish a productive relationship, the Board must:

1. Ensure there is a clear understanding of the scope of authority delegated to the executive officer
2. Ensure that policies and strategies agreed by the board should be expressed in an unambiguous manner, so that the executive officer and staff responsible for implementing those policies are clear as to what is expected. All directions should come from the Board as a whole
3. Act fairly and in accordance with good employment and equal opportunity principles in making decisions affecting the appointment, recruitment, professional development, appraisal, remuneration and discipline of the executive officer and staff
4. Understand, accept and respect the difference in roles between the Board, executive officer and staff, ensuring that the honorary officers, Board members, the executive

¹ Mike Hudson (1995) *Managing Without Profit*, Penguin: London

officer and his/her team work effectively and cohesively for the benefit of the organisation, and develop a mutually supportive and loyal relationship

5. Ensure that having given the executive officer delegated authority, they should be careful, individually or as a whole, not to undermine it

Executive officers must:

1. Act within the powers delegated to him/her by the Board of Management and must be responsible to the Board for these delegated powers
2. Respect the proper sphere of responsibility of the Board
3. Work within the policy parameters laid down by the Board. However, if an executive officer believes that a policy is wrong or inadvisable, he/she should make his/her misgivings clear to the Board. However, once a policy has been passed by the Board, an executive officer has a duty to implement that policy.
4. Be accountable to the Board for his/her decisions and for his/her performance, for the performance of the staff and volunteers and for the performance of the organisation

Above all else, the Board of Management and the Executive Officer must, at all times, act in the best interest of the organisation and its stakeholders.

(Source: Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations, London)

Checklist

- Are members of the board clear on their role and responsibilities in regard to the organisation and the executive officer?
- Is the executive officer clear on their role and responsibilities in regards to their organisation and relationship with the board of management?
- Is there a written agreement on these matters in the form of job descriptions/statement of responsibilities for all parties?

Relevant resources available from the Management Support Unit (MSU)

- **MSU Information Sheet 1** Simple measures to assist non-government organisations in maintaining good governance (Free)
- **MSU Information Sheet 2** A Code of Conduct for Boards of Management of Incorporated Non Government Organisations (Free)
- **MSU Information Sheet 4** A Code of Conduct for Executive Officers of Voluntary Organisations (Free)
- **MSU Information Sheet 7** Qualities for Good Leadership (Free)
- **MSU Information Sheet 10** Professional Supervision (Free)
- *Better Meetings* Community Child Care Co-operative (Loan)
- *Effective Meetings* Community Child Care Co-operative (Loan)
- *Incorporation: an explanation of the Associations Incorporation Act* G. Wheeler, NCOSS (Purchase)
- *Meeting Procedures* Conflict Resolution Network (Loan)
- *Appraising the Chief Executive: an essential guide to performance review* ACEVO London 2002 (Loan)
- *Codes of Conduct and Service Agreements for CEOs* ACEVO London (Loan)
- *Supervision in the Helping Professions – a practical approach* Mary McMahon & Wendy Patton 2002 (Loan)
- *Managing the Managers – developing constructive relationships and roles between paid and honorary managers in non-government community services* NCOSS 1992 (Loan)
- *Leading the Organisation – the relationship between chair and chief executive* ACEVO London 2002 (Loan)
- *Managing Community Organisations* Ettinger House (Series of 5 booklets) (Loan)
- *The Book of the Board: Effective Governance for Non-Profit Organisations* David Fishel (Loan)

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