



The Culture of the Boardroom



Youth for Christ/USA grants a charter to local boards of directors to carry out the mission of YFC in their community. A Youth for Christ Chapter will flourish with a healthy board at its foundation and it will struggle without a strong board. There are tangible and measurable elements that make up a healthy board. The number of board members, the attendance at board meetings, and the activity the board does in propelling the work forward are all measurable activities.

As often is the case in life, the intangible factors have as much to do with success as do measurable factors. Among the highest of the intangible factors of success is a healthy board culture.

The board culture determines how board members relate to each other, the staff and the community. The "culture" is a set of norms that may not be spoken of, but exist and all know they what they are. (We all have learned the culture of the elevator - step in - look forward - speak softly - none of us ever went to "Elevator 101," but we know the expected culture.)

Having a positive board culture is the most important factor in recruiting and retaining good board members. As much as we are driven by the mission of Youth for Christ there are other good and noble causes in our community that need board members. Where someone might have an interest in YFC moving forward, they will look at what happens in the boardroom before they decide to join a board.

What elements make up a positive board culture?

Mission Focused. If the board meetings and communications are focused on the processes (usually the money issues) and not on the mission, it gets old fast. Ministry progress reports, kid impact reports and live testimonies from kids help us focus on the mission. Healthy boards signed on to be stewards of the mission to reach lost kids in their communities. That's a much bigger challenge than guaranteeing the light bills get paid, and it requires constant focus.

Shared Journey. Board members don't typically come onto a board talking about "the journey", but they do look at how connected the board members

are and if the members actually like being together. Praying for each other's personal issues, meals together, extended dreaming and planning meetings, interaction outside of the boardroom, all lead to a sense of "being in this together."

"Safety Net" Accountability. Accountability alone says "you need to know that someone will be checking up on you". Safety net accountability says "I will do everything in my power to see that you succeed, but in order to do that I need to see how you are doing." People chafe at accountability in theory, but in practice they thrive under it. If the board practices safety net accountability with each other and

with the Executive Director it will drive excellence throughout the organization.

Emotionally Safe. A board member should be able to constructively handle conflict and have an aversion to it at the same time. A boardroom that is dominated by conflict will breed an organization that is no fun to be a part of. Board members should feel that they are free to express their views without backlash. Board members need to learn how to cheerfully serve when the vote does not go their way. (Or if it is a matter of conscience, how to politely step off.) A climate of mutual respect should permeate the boardroom.

Straight up Communication. It may sound like the opposite of “emotionally safe,” but it is really an extension of it. Board members should come into the boardroom without hidden agendas, without politicking their cause before hand, and with a willingness to speak the same thing in front of someone that they would say in their absence. Divergence is at the core of the Biblical mandate to have many counselors. If everyone agreed with the first one that spoke, it would only be one counselor. So much potential for the Kingdom has been lost over protecting someone’s feelings. A skilled board member will learn the talent of getting their point across without damaging relationships. An unskilled board member will either go home frustrated for having withheld their opinion, or alienate others by expressing their opinion inappropriately.

Achievement. Serving on a board is only rewarding if the organization is accomplishing something. Celebrating achievement binds us together, it makes missing dinner one night a month worthwhile, and it provides us with a “pride of ownership” when it comes to YFC. Unfortunately, sometimes even when there is real achievement, we are too busy applying grease to the squeaky wheel to celebrate together the accomplishments. Simple little things like a cake with a candle lit for every kid that came to Christ that month can dissolve away the struggles it took to make that happen.

Who is responsible for the culture of the board?



It is a joint effort of all board members led by the chair. The place most people learn about serving on boards is from other board experience. Most have served on non-profit boards including church boards. Some have had good

training and experience, and some will carry unhealthy practices over from previous experience.

Where do we get started in improving our board culture?

First, state it as a desire. Some of the implementation such as celebrating achievement and having a mission focus will happen by intentionally programming it in. Those are the easy ones. More difficult are the ones that have to do with relating at a deeper level, greater accountability and developing constructive communication. Those may feel a little threatening and may be best addressed in an extended board meeting or retreat.

How do we know if we got there?

Board meetings will be fun, people will want to come, and recruitment will not be like pulling teeth.

Is it worth the effort?

The better the board culture, the better the platform for the organization to accomplish the mission. Or, to put it another way, a stronger board culture will translate into more kids hearing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Yes, it is worth the effort.