

## **RESPONSES TO CASE STUDY 10** *(on page 29)*

### **CHALLENGES OF CHOOSING A NEW BOARD CHAIR**

**RESPONSE** Unfortunately, this is a situation many boards face. Succession planning is a process that requires continuous effort and attention, but many boards don't address it early enough. The board of RMT can use the current chair's retirement as an opportunity to make board succession a priority — and deal with it as a main component of the upcoming strategic planning process while developing a plan to avoid this dilemma in the future.

A possible solution to this particularly sensitive situation would be to pursue Saayed's support in a transitional role. The board should thank Saayed profusely for his willingness to step into this serious void, but suggest that he take on the responsibilities of board chair on an interim basis, e.g., throughout the strategic planning process. This would provide time for the board to determine and articulate its succession plan and to more clearly outline the skills needed in the next chair. I recommend that the board hire a consultant or facilitator to coach Saayed, to lead the board and the chief executive through the strategic planning process, and to help identify the skills needed in the next chair.

After the key strategies of the organization and the critical skills of the chair are identified, the process of recruiting and selecting candidates will become much more efficient. Furthermore, a well-thought-out strategic plan is a great selling point to any potential candidate for the chair's position. Knowing what's on the horizon may make the position seem more attractive to the existing board members too. They may also conclude that Saayed, with coaching, is the right person for the chair's position.

RMT's predicament demonstrates the importance of continuous succession planning. It is one of the most important functions of a board. In the future, this board must devote time at each meeting for succession planning for the board chair and the chief executive. One only has to think of the McDonald's Corporation losing two CEOs in less than a year to poor health to imagine the dire consequences of not having a succession plan. Boards must be prepared for the succession of leadership — it's their responsibility.

**RESPONSE** Rocky Mountain Transitions is to be commended for its early success in assisting immigrants in the Colorado community. Transitioning to new board leadership, however, could create some new "rocky mountains" if the next chair is not equipped to lead the board strategically. Furthermore, the small size of the board necessitates that members bring a blend of the right skill sets to help the organization achieve its objectives. Given the perception of dwindling interest by members and lack of a suitable next chair, the governance committee

should consider meeting with Umberto for an honest discussion and to get his input. The next step would be to meet with the full board for a review of options before moving forward.

As one option, the committee might ask Umberto about his willingness to remain in office for an extended year while a succession plan is developed. It's possible that the current work of the board has become too routine and no longer holds the captivating interest of the early years. The board should step back and objectively assess its performance and expectations.

To avoid the succession problem in the future, it is essential to define the governance committee's role so that it has visibility year-round in nurturing existing and future leaders. Enlarging the board's size might add bench strength and diversity of skills. Some boards appoint a vice chair or chair-elect to prepare leaders for the next phase. If current members lack time or are intimidated to follow in the footsteps of their founding chair, perhaps two members with complementary skills might be willing to act as co-chairs for the next phase of the community's life. Another option is to call on the expertise of a consultant, whose work with the board may rekindle passion and motivation, leading to a desire to serve as a leader.

In any case, it would be best to communicate to Sayaad that the board is not yet ready to bring a recommendation for chair without further internal work among all board members. This is a critical time in the life of the organization and rushing this important decision could be counterproductive to its future.

**RESPONSE** Rocky Mountain Transitions teaches that actions based on perceptions about immigrants are unfair because they're often wrong. This lesson seems to present an ironic key to understanding RMT's perception about leadership.

A brief look at RMT's board situation suggests that members are doing some critical things correctly: They focus on governance; active members give time and money; term limits encourage board members to move on. This last behavior is remarkable considering how difficult it is for some, especially founders, to leave.

RMT does, however, need to create a board leadership development plan. Board members would benefit from asking: What leadership support and training will be available? Will there be succession from vice president to president or president-elect? How will officers and the chief executive mentor prospective leaders? Answers to these questions are important but subordinate to the main issue — RMT's mental model of board leadership. Its model underlies, like the foundation of a skyscraper, the essence of any RMT plan.

Just as mental models about immigrants may be flawed, some mental models about boards are outdated. The value of a person's potential as a board member is no longer measured by his (intentionally "his") ability to underwrite organizational costs, as when trustees gave their name and money but little else. Now we want board members to also contribute expertise and ideas. The mental model of the ideal board chair has also evolved — from powerful, charismatic men to committed people of diverse backgrounds who are willing to share power and who are knowledgeable (about the organization and board leadership).

The irony is that RMT creates mental models about immigrants that abandon stereotypes, but sustains a "model" about board leadership loaded with stereotypes! Saayed may not fit the organization's view of a "natural leader," but have RMT's clients always fit a common view of the ideal American? Saayed has the same commitment and potential (proven by his service and reputation) that RMT's clients have. Re-perceiving mental models brings wonderful possibilities.

All are born leaders, many are willing to be "made," but only some are "chosen." Saayed should be chosen, and RMT has the responsibility to resource and support his success.

## RESPONSES TO CASE STUDY 20 *(on page 57)*

### STEALING THE SPOTLIGHT

**RESPONSE 1** Every organization's dream is to have a volunteer like Ben — full of enthusiasm, a go-getter, and fully committed to making his organization become successful. Sure, he's got some issues to work on; every board member does.

But luckily board orientation is continuous, and there is ample opportunity to work with him. Volunteer management is about managing the skills, interests, and developments of each volunteer.

I would recommend letting Ben — and all board members — know the impact that each of them has as board members. They need to know how they can be resources for the organization, build connections, and even make commitments for the organization within the confines of the organizational structure and the appropriate division of responsibilities between board and staff. The board chair should take the lead on this, drawing on outside resources as necessary to clarify board roles.

Marsha and Ben should talk candidly about how Ben's actions challenge the unity and credibility of the board. She should emphasize the bind that he puts the organization in when he works without the consent of the board. He needs to know that the other members perceive his attempts to help as devaluing the board's decisions. Highlight the value of Ben's fund-raising and relationship-building skills and the success he has brought to the ballet company while also helping him develop as a team member. The important thing is to cultivate his enthusiasm and skills and help him channel them in a positive way.

As a reward for Ben's relentless devotion to the organization, Marsha should further give him the opportunity to continue scheduling performances within the confines of the board's duties. I would suggest giving Ben a couple dates to schedule performances for the company and leaving those dates open until he secures commitments. This would give him the freedom he needs while adhering to the company's schedule. I would also put Ben in a leadership role in cultivating relationships for the ballet company. He obviously has the skills and energy — he just lacks the support of everyone else.

**RESPONSE 2** The obvious issue in this case is that Ben Williamson is a loose cannon. The board chair's role is to manage the board, and it will be a touchy task to reel Ben in and not offend him. Yet Marsha needs to address Ben's behavior with him.

The less obvious issue is that Ben's behavior could be a symptom that the board has outgrown its own structure. It is necessary for this organization to assess where it is developmentally and how it must be organized to continue to grow. As president of the board, Marsha must provide leadership to this process.

Joie de Vivre Ballet Company is a fledgling, volunteer-run organization. The board is in the forming stage of its development. The board members wear many hats, which is not unusual and often required. Board members may conduct programs, schedule activities, keep the books, and even mow the grass in a young organization. This practice is necessary to get the work done. But alternating between governance and management duties can confuse board members regarding their responsibilities.

The ballet company also has experienced tremendous growth in a short period of time. The program has a national presence, the budget has grown significantly, and a five-year plan is in place. These facts are indicators that the organization is maturing. The board must consider how these organizational changes have altered the needs of the organization. They must ask, "How must this organization be structured to function efficiently and effectively today and tomorrow?" The answer has to focus on change in both the governance and management functions of the organization.

It is a typical response of start-up boards not to want to let go of the day-to-day operations of the organization. Yet letting go in a planned way is what will allow the organization to flourish. Holding on too tight will stop the organization from maturing. Marsha's real challenge is providing leadership to the board in making the changes necessary to move this organization to the next level in its development. Once the organization's infrastructure catches up to its needs, it will be much easier for all board members to understand their responsibilities and play their roles consistently and effectively.

**RESPONSE**  
**3** Fortunately, the challenge facing Marsha can be addressed in a way that will greatly benefit the ballet company. Ben seems to be overzealous in his activities on behalf of the company.

What Marsha needs to do is not reign in his zealotry but harness it for the good of the organization.

Certainly, Marsha, as board chair, should continue to talk with Ben about the importance of coordination and communication among all of the board members. But a more tangible solution for Ben might be more beneficial in the long run. Marsha could introduce to the board the idea of forming a new board committee, chaired by Ben, which would have responsibility over the ballet company's schedule. Once this committee and the full board have agreed on policies and procedures for how a particular performance would be approved for the schedule Ben would be able to work within those guidelines.

Marsha must not make Ben feel punished or overwhelmed by this new task. Ben should feel that being asked to chair a committee is an affirmation of his abilities and connections. Another benefit of this approach would be that Ben would be responsible for correcting any future schedule conflicts. Perhaps Ben would look differently on the New York engagement and the conflict it created if he were the one that had to call the major donor and reschedule that performance.