



Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 9: Communicate excessively with your board, but be smart about it.

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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article details fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),¹ buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

Collectively, I believe these lessons are a very useful set of principles that Executive Directors can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

Lesson 9 is: Communicate excessively with your board, but be smart about it.

One of the common pitfalls that new Executive Directors face is a failure to recognize the disconnection between what they know about the organization and what the board and other close friends of the organization know.

You live and breathe this stuff. They don't.

As that gap grows, dangers abound. When it comes to setting the organization's strategic direction, a board and staff that are seriously disconnected about the basic facts about the organization's work are far more likely to disagree.

I once spoke with an Executive Director who feared their board's involvement in strategic planning. "They don't understand what we do, how can they set our strategy?"

I sometimes think of the Executive Director as the conductor and the board as the orchestra. If they aren't on the same page, they may still play, but it won't sound very good.

So my advice to new Executive Directors is to communicate excessively with their boards (and other close friends), but be strategic about it.

Here are my top eight tips about how to make that happen:

1. Board packets should be complete and get out on time.

¹ I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

Reading is a much more efficient way to convey information than speaking at a board meeting. Board packets should be thorough and given to board members sufficiently in advance of a meeting so they can digest it. For most boards, that's a week.

2. Start where they are, not where you are.

In writing memos to them outlining your recommendations, start where they are, not where you are. Put yourself into the head of a board member and give them the information they would want to know.

3. Repeat yourself.

Remember that you live this and they don't. Just because you've told the board something, doesn't mean they'll remember it. If there are key facts, strategies, or other things you think the board should know, communicate them multiple times in different ways.

4. Communicate after board meetings with those who didn't attend.

One of the biggest barriers to a board and Executive Directors staying on the same page is that board member attendance at board meetings will be inherently uneven. In nearly 13 years running the Oregon League of Conservation Voters we held perhaps 50 board meetings and, ironically, the only meeting where I ever had perfect attendance was the one where I told them I was leaving.

The danger is that board members who miss meetings aren't aware of key decisions and become disconnected from the latest happenings of the organization. Minutes usually don't come out quickly and for most organizations are solely focused on action items that required board voting.

So I took to writing a memo the day after every board meeting entitled: "What happened at the [Insert Date] board meeting." I would explicitly say: "these aren't minutes." And I'd make it clear they were primarily for the benefit of those who didn't attend, but I encourage those who did to read them and let me know if you think I mischaracterized anything.

I would then lay out the most significant things that took place at the board meeting, including all the action items but throwing in other areas of importance. It usually took about 30 minutes to write this for a 4 hour board meeting.

It was well worth it, both because board members really appreciated it and it also served as a quick place for me to search back and recall what we had done and when.

5. Don't rely just on email.

People are busy and not all emails get read or dealt with – not out of a conscious choice to ignore you, but rather just from excessive competition from other demands on your boards' time.

I once spoke with an Executive Director complaining about their board's lack of engagement and it became clear that his evidence amounted to: "I emailed them, and they didn't respond."

Pick up the phone and call them. Meet with them in person.

6. Remember it's about relationships.

Lesson 2 of Why Organizations Thrive was: [Relentlessly focus on relationships.](#)

Nowhere is this as important as it is with board members.

Lesson 9 isn't "Talk to your board excessively." It's communicate with them.

Communication is a two way street. You need to talk to them and learn from them, continually reading their temperature about the organization. This will help you fine-tune your own communication with them, and help keep the board pointing in the same direction.

More importantly, it also allows for you to develop an authentic relationship with them based on mutual respect and shared values. Having a real relationship with them places you in a far better position to push them to greater levels of leadership on behalf of the organization. And yes, leadership includes fundraising.

My personal goal as Executive Director was to meet at least once each year with every board member informally over lunch or coffee for an open-ended chat.

And with new board members, I always did an "orientation," which was as much about my getting to know them as their getting to know the organization.

7. Be candid when things have gone wrong.

If you or your staff screwed up, own up to it, and be timely about it.

I made a couple horrible mistakes at OLCV, both times costing OLCV real money. Some boards might have freaked, but I think mine appreciated how up front I was about the situation, what happened, what lessons we had learned from it, etc.

If board members grow to lack trust that their Executive Director is presenting an honest picture to them, it's very hard to move forward.

8. Quantity of communication isn't as important as quality.

This is the "be smart about it" part of the lesson.

Burying your board in paper isn't the same as communicating with them. You can communicate so many different things that they throw up their hands and tune you out.

I once read an Executive Director's yearly report to their board and it was mind-numbingly detailed, exceedingly dry, and I can't fathom it was digested by anybody.

When board members asked questions, the Executive Directors' response was: "that was in my annual report, haven't you read it?"

Your board should be thinking about two things predominantly for your organization: big picture strategy and fiscal health/fundraising. Focus most of your communications on those areas.

So communicate with them excessively to build the relationship and make sure they understand key details that effect strategy, but that's not the same as burying them in information and trivia.

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