Small Group Work for Board Team Building

Boards, committees and subcommittees all need to function well as teams. Teams work best when people:

- Feel connected to each other;

- Know something about what strengths and knowledge the other folks on the team bring, and what things are challenging for them; and,

- Know how to communicate across the differences between team members.

We can help build these connections and understandings by providing opportunities for team members to:

- **Really listen to each other**. It is useful to give folks opportunities to listen to each other with curiosity when the stakes are not yet high and there is little fear that they themselves will not be heard. Then they have a stronger foundation when things do get more challenging.

- **Work through differences of perception and opinion** to find mutually acceptable solutions.

- **Work together on concrete, doable "projects"** that show results.

Here are some tools for creating those opportunities, while continuing to move the work of the team forward.

1. **Strengthen Connection and Understanding Through Active Listening.**
   Incorporate active listening exercises into meetings in order to simultaneously move the content of the meeting forward and build the connection and mutual understanding that will help your team work well together.

   A. **Build respect and trust.**
      One useful active listening exercise for team building is directly focused on mutual respect and trust. I often use this early in my work with a given team.

      1) <u>In triads</u>: (10-15 minutes with set up – 2-4 minutes per person)

         One at a time, each person in the pairs or triads tells a brief story about a time when they felt respected, or saw respect offered someone else. Let them know that it does not matter whether that took place at work.

         As they listen, their partners list what made the person in the story feel respected, and what emerged when/because that person felt respected.

         Optional: Partners reflect back their guesses about what made that person feel respected, or felt like respect was being offered. These

guesses should be offered without explanation, as simply as possible. The goal is simply to give the person who told the story an opportunity to hear, and think about, what sorts of behaviors signal respect to them.

2) <u>Back in the full group</u>: (20-30 minutes)

The facilitator mines the stories and rotating pairs by asking the participants to offer, popcorn style, answers to the two questions:

    A. What makes us feel respected?

    B. What emerges when we feel respected?

Write the responses up on separate wall sheets.

You can also invite participants to list (use separate wall sheets, and ideally different colored pens from A and B)

    C. What makes us feel disrespected?

    D. What emerges when we do not feel respected?

Discuss what the group is seeing, what creating mutual respect nurtures. Ask if that is what the group wants to be creating in their work relationships.

B. Use an active listening format to move particular agenda items forward.
The above exercise is designed to lay some of the foundation your board (or other team) will need to work well together. A very similar format can be used, often more quickly, to continue to build a sense of connection and understanding between team members while also getting work done that the team needs to do. For example:

1) If you are working on improving the board's capacity to recruit new board members and retain them, start with an active listening exercise structured like the respect exercise, but with a prompt like "What are two things you wish you'd been told about serving on this board before you said yes?" or "What do you like best about being on this board?"

Then mine the answers, popcorn-style (as we did), and build on those insights as you build lists of what changes you might want to make. (You can do multiple rounds if you want to ask more than one question.)

Using the same basic structure, here are some other examples:

2) If you are working on developing (or revising) personnel policies, you might ask "What are the benefits you would most want to have if you were applying for a job today?"

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3) If you are developing the form and process you'll use for evaluating the executive director, you might ask "What was your best or worst experience of being evaluated, and what lessons might we learn from that as we design our process?"

4) If you are trying to redesign your individual donor program so it is more successful, you might ask "What causes you to give money to one organization and not another; what do the successful organizations do well in their relationship with you?"

5) If you are redesigning an annual event, you might ask "What did you like best about last year's event?" or "What did you wish had been different about last year's event?" or for new board members/people who weren't at the last event "What is your favorite memory of going to an event like this?" or "What would make this year's event something you'd really look forward to?"

2. **Work Through Differences to Find Mutually Acceptable Solutions.** When you are trying to **make decisions** about topics that include controversy/differences of opinion, create structures that encourage people to listen deeply to each other. Those structures could include:

1. After some discussion, when it becomes clear that there are differences of opinion, break people into pairs, asking them to pair up with people they think they might not agree with completely where possible.
   - Ask one person in the pair to spend 2 minutes telling the other person:
     - What's most important to them about this topic/decision and what makes it so important
     - What they are uncertain about or have questions about
   - The person listening then has 2 minutes to reflect back what they heard, in different words, to be sure they understood well.
   - Then the roles inside the pairs swap.
   - When you come back to the full group, you can just continue the conversation in an open-ended way, or you can first ask people to report back:
     - What they learned that felt new to them;
     - Anything that changed in their own perceptions or opinions about the topic/decision.

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2. Ask people who are in strong disagreement to reflect back what they are hearing the person they disagree with say before responding, to check for understanding.

3. Ask the group to list the assumptions they are making (put on a wall sheet): test for conflicting assumptions, and for assumptions that need to be ground-checked.

4. Identify the areas of clear agreement, and the areas where there is still disagreement (be sure you have tested well that you indeed have consensus on the areas where you think there is agreement). Then ask the group to identify:

   a. Things they are still unsure about;

   b. Questions they have about the topic or about other people's opinions or assumptions;

   c. What specific changes they would need to whatever is being proposed to feel comfortable with it.

   This can be done in the full group, or discussed first in small groups and reported out on wall sheets.

3. **Get members of the team working together on concrete, doable projects.** When we need people to build their capacity to work together, giving them a chance to be successful doing so in smaller sub-groups, or on small, finite, doable tasks, can help build their skills and, equally importantly, their willingness to and confidence about taking the risk to actively participate. Here are some ways to do that.

   1. Identify specific, relevant and appropriate tasks that can be accomplished in a short period of time in a meeting and do them. Examples:

      a. Brainstorm a list of organizations that might be useful strategic allies and what a strong relationship with them might bring (could do in pairs first and then report back to the full group).

      b. Have a contest where you break the board into teams of 3-4 and challenge them – in good fun – to generate creative content, for instance: (a) create an image that captures the value/work of the organization, or (b) write a short phrase about why the work of the organization is important.

      c. Do one or more of the 10 minute board exercises from the CNS website. Pick one that feels strongly connected to what your board needs.

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2. Delegate tasks that need to be done between meetings to Working Groups[1] of board members (could also include some non-board members, but that takes more effort and planning). Since your goal here is to build connection and collaboration skills as well as get some useful work done:

a. **Choose the Right Task:** Make sure those tasks are:

    i. Useful;

    ii. Inspiring and/or fun; and

    iii. Complex/big enough to be done well by a team with multiple people.

b. **Support them in Being Successful:** Make sure when you set them up that the group

    i. Wants to do them;

    ii. Is clear about the task(s) involved and the deadlines;

    iii. Has what they need to be successful (information, skills on the team, connections to others who can help, etc.); and,

    iv. If relevant, knows whether they have final decision-making and/or implementation power, or whether they are creating recommendations to bring back to the board or staff for final decisions.

c. **Check in regularly** with the team to be sure they are progressing well and feel good about what they are doing; provide support if needed. This will pay off over the long haul because people will volunteer to do more such tasks if this goes well, and they will be building their own skills.

d. **Acknowledge and Celebrate the Work:** Make room in the board meeting when the task is finished for the team to report on its accomplishment and their experience doing the work, and celebrate. You want to create a positive feedback spiral where these folks want to do more, and other folks want to volunteer to do things. This happens best if people feel good about what they did, and feel appreciated for having done it.

Examples – Here are a few tasks you might delegate this way:

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[1] I use the term "Working Groups" for teams working on finite tasks, and "Committees" for standing groups that are responsible for particular roles.

- Go back through your files of photos and pick out some great ones for the upcoming anniversary event.

- Organize an event, or an aspect of an event.

- Review a policy or procedure (could include researching what similar organizations do about this policy or procedure) and make recommendations about changes.

- Design a brochure, a webpage, etc. (Make sure the group is clear about the design parameters and resources available, and about whether they are empowered to just do this, or are bringing recommendations back to the board or staff for final decision.)

- Do a research project/collect information that will help the organization move forward.
  - Could be a library/internet-based project (i.e. searching for foundations that might fund the organization, or articles on trauma-informed care, etc.)
  - Could involve interviewing people (i.e. talk with previous board members about why they chose to serve on the board and why they left, or ask people who you serve who agreed to be interviewed about what the services you provide have meant to them)

  For projects like this, significant staff support may be needed to ensure the team has the knowledge and materials it needs to do the task well.

The bottom line is that we need to look for – and create – opportunities for board members to connect as people and build their understandings of each other while they are also learning more about subjects they are tackling and contributing to the work of the organization.

Resource: For more tools, I strongly recommend Sam Kaner's book the *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. (Available for free as part of the Select Books program of the Ford Family Foundation.)