

## Market Leadership: Strengthening Your Board of Directors

This chapter will enable you to:

- ▶ Understand the challenges of leadership in a farmers market.
- ▶ Choose strategies to strengthen your board of directors.

The board-staff relationship is a paradoxical one. When acting in a governing role, the board must stand above staff and be the “boss.” But when acting in a supporting role, board members must act to support and assist staff-led work. Some board members become so excited about their role as governors that they mistake governance for close supervision of management and begin meddling in minor management affairs. In other cases, as boards govern more, they shirk their supporting role. The challenge is to fulfill both roles, not simply switch from one to the other. (The Support Center for Nonprofit Management, *The Paradox and the Challenge: Practical Ways to Strengthen Governance*, San Francisco, California.)

### The Manager and the Board: Who leads Whom?

One of the most often cited challenges in market leadership is defining the roles of board members and their relation to the manager and staff of the market. How much direction the manager receives from the board can be critical to the market, depending on the skills, experience, and initiative of the manager. For example, one manager described a situation in which a hands-off board looked away as an inexperienced manager destroyed relationships with many people in the community, including the city agency that allowed the market to use its space. The manager was rude to potential new vendors, failed to return phone calls to the city, and neglected many of the communication responsibilities of the job. In the end, the market lost its location and was barely saved by another manager stepping in to take over. In this case, a strong, active board could have intervened to change the course of events and guide the manager in a more constructive way.

In many cases, however, it is the market manager who frames issues for the board and gets their support. Essentially, the manager leads the board. In this situation, it takes extra effort and time for the manager to give the board direction instead of the other way around. The problem with this type of governance is that an unskilled manager can easily run amok and do great damage to the market. Ef-

## Farmers Market Management Skills

fectively, only one person is making decisions instead of an organized governing body providing checks and balances.

Poorly defined roles between the manager/staff and the board can also lead to power struggles and resentment. For instance, one board member described a situation in which the market staff began to run the board meetings, having become accustomed to making most decisions and taking on the vast majority of market responsibilities. "The board has a common vision of what the community is and what the market is, but the logistics and the work of what that means relies on the work of only one or two board members and the staff." After the meeting, board members were angry because they felt their authority had been undermined and the staff were resentful and felt unappreciated.

Ideally, a manager should not take over in response to a lack of support from the board. The manager should address the situation and make the relationship more effective. Managing a farmers market is not something one person should do alone and the board should be there to help you.

### Strengthening Your Board

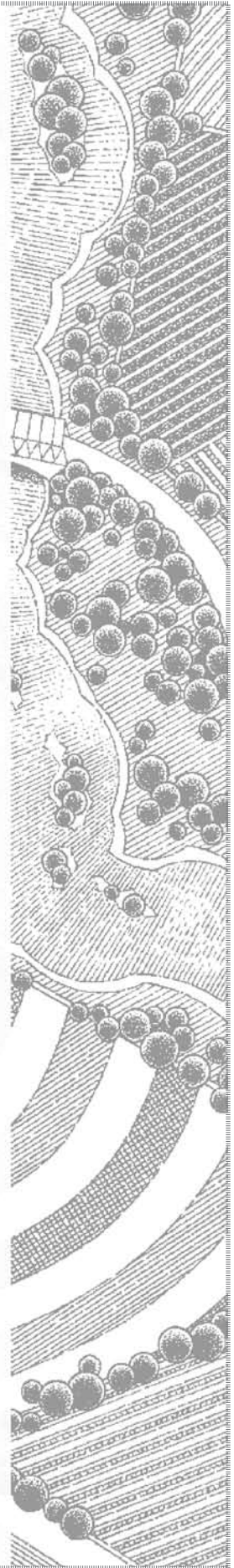
Ideally, board members are chosen for their leadership qualities, vision, and skill and work together effectively to direct and support the market manager. In reality, that is not always the case, and it falls to the manager to take the initiative to strengthen the board. Following are some strategies for managers to develop the skills and effectiveness of the board of directors.

#### Create a Collective Vision

A board member who has been involved with the market for three days or three years should be invested in the success of the market. Make sure that your board members have a collective vision of the history, purpose, direction, and objectives of the market.

#### Work on Communication

Keep communication lines open. Keep minutes of your meetings and distribute them to every board member afterward. Some markets use newsletters or memos to provide information to all board members. Occasionally, hold a retreat as an opportunity for members to get to know each other better in a different context. Facilitated activities, whether for one hour or one day, can help build team unity.







### Be Proactive

No matter how wonderful things may look now, keep working on strengthening your board. You want to be a strong functional team when challenges arise. When times are easy, take care of some of those things that have been neglected. Do the bylaws need to be updated? Do you have a strategic plan for the next few years? There will always be something to do to make your market stronger.

### Prioritize

You and your board will not be able to accomplish all of the great ideas that arise at meetings. As a group, prioritize what is most important and follow through on those things. It is important to be realistic about what you can accomplish.

### Thinking about the Future of Your Board

Over time, your board will change as members leave, retire, or become too busy to continue in their leadership role. Use this transition time as a way to strengthen your board. The typical board recruitment process focuses on filling vacancies for the following year only. However, part of your long-range plan should include a strategy for developing your board over the next several years. Such a plan should consider the following questions (Frank Marinelli, "Encouraging Visionary Board Leadership," *Nonprofit World*, 6(4) 1998:11–14.):

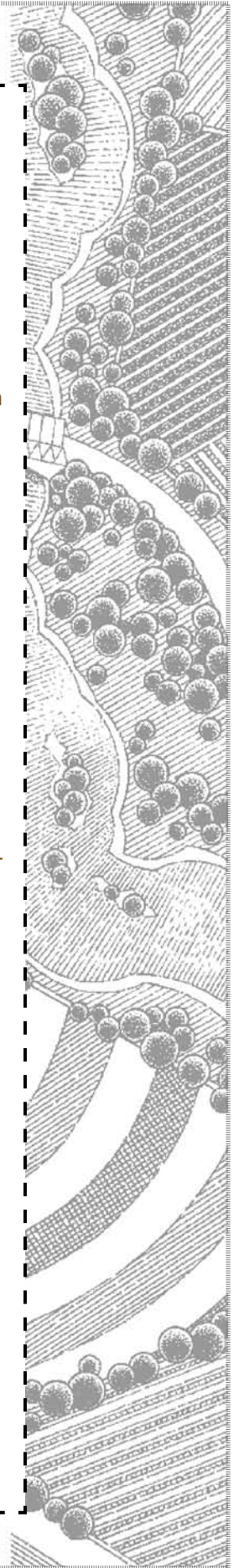
- Who will lead and serve the board over the next five years?
- What skills, knowledge, and other attributes would strengthen the board?
- What is our plan to scout leadership talent for the future?
- How will we go about fostering and developing future board leadership?

Use these questions to devise a board development process. Consider forming a committee to focus specifically on this process. Taking the time to strategically plan for the composition, responsibilities, and overall assets of your board leadership will result in a board that complements and strengthens the work you do. All of these things together will build a stronger market.

### Four Ideas for Recruiting New Board Members

- Form a One-Meeting Nominating Committee. Draw up a list of twenty well-connected people of the sort you would want on the board but who you suspect would not join (but who might know someone who would be a good board member). Call those twenty people and ask them to come to a one-meeting committee over lunch. Tell them that at the lunch they will be told more about the organization and what it is looking for in board members. At the end of lunch, ask them simply for the name of one person they think would be a good board member. The day after the lunch, call each of the nominees and begin by explaining who nominated them.
- Take out a “Help Wanted—Volunteer Board Member” ad in the neighborhood newsletter or alumni newsletter of a local college. Example: “HELP SOUTH PARK . . . We are looking for a few talented and conscientious volunteer board members to help us guide our programs into the next century. If you can contribute one evening a month and have skills or contacts in accounting, publicity, or special-event fundraising, call to find out more about whether this volunteer opportunity is right for you.”
- Ask the manager or volunteer coordinator if there are two or three hands-on volunteers who would make good board members. Hands-on volunteers bring both demonstrated commitment AND an intimate knowledge of the organization’s strengths and weaknesses. Volunteers, donors, and customers should be the first place you look. You do not have to “sell” the agency—they know it already!
- Pick four local organizations in which you do not know anyone would like to (examples: NAACP, Japanese American Citizens League, Accountants for the Public Interest). Tip: Your local Yahoo site ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) is a good place to look for lists under “Community.” Ask each officer to call one of the four local organizations and ask to have coffee with the board president or manager. Over coffee, suggest that your two organizations recommend “retiring” board members to each other as a way of establishing organizational links and strengthening ties among communities.

The Support Center for Nonprofit Management, *Board Café*, 2(6) 1998.





### Characteristics of Visionary Board Leaders

Use this list to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your board.

- They are visionary and future-focused, spending most of their decision-making time looking forward.
- They possess an entrepreneurial spirit, understanding that their organization operates in a fast changing market place and seeking products and services to meet emerging customer needs.
- They are risk-takers who balance the need to take chances with traditional stewardship responsibilities of board service.
- They are good communicators who understand the importance of communication at all levels and organize the board and its committees accordingly.
- They are systems thinkers, seeking the root causes of issues they face.
- They discover creative ways to connect their organization to the world around them, exploring new partnerships and alliances that support their mission's strategic plan.
- They value diversity, understanding that it promotes creativity, innovation, organizational learning, and responsiveness to customers.

— Frank Marinelli,  
"Encouraging Visionary Board Leadership,"  
*Nonprofit World*, 16(4) 1998:11–14.)

### Conclusion

Although it is the board's job to direct and support the farmers market manager and the manager's job to implement the board's decisions and report to the board, in actuality farmers market leadership is more complex than that simple description implies. As manager, you may be the only person with the experience or time to devote to formally developing the business and leadership of the market; to receive effective direction and the support you need, you may have to take the initiative to strengthen your board of directors.

