Briefing Notes:
Lessons Learned from a Board Development Intervention

The following are lessons learned over a four-year period as CFAR collaborated with the executive director and successive Board presidents in increasing the effectiveness of a board of a professional association.

1. ***Board development begins more productively with board members having a different experience of their work, not talking abstractly about board development and board effectiveness.*** In this case, a group of young Turks, not the current board leadership, were charged with developing a new strategic plan. Working with CFAR, they experienced a variety of different ways of thinking and working together that increased their dissatisfaction with the standard operating processes of the board and its committees. This took place over one year. There was a core of board members who had experienced a better way.

2. ***Find opportunities to give the whole board a mini-experience of different ways of working.*** In the course of the strategic planning, at the beginning with an issue-identification work session with the board, and at the end, with solid substantive working sessions in small groups, other board members were exposed to different ways of working.

3. ***Look for many small improvements consistently implemented versus a revolution.*** In this association, the executive director began to spend much more time on the transmittal of the board book—a massive binder, with dividers for all the committee reports and agenda items. She zoned much of the routine work into a consent agenda, pushed the Chair hard to winnow the agenda to a more workable set of issues and in a transmittal memorandum was much clearer about what was wanted from board members on each item. She also used a rapid e-mail after the board meeting to solicit feedback, which she tabulated and distributed, modeling continuous improvement (Weick, 1984; Gilmore et al., 1997).

4. ***Look over the range of current practices to highlight and build on places of true engagement and effectiveness.*** In this organization, they reviewed the board agendas for two years and found that the standing committees infrequently provided a significant item. Furthermore, the agenda of the board meeting was loosely coupled to the board's strategy. The high-energy processes were an ad hoc group with a real external deadline on a complex issue that usually bridged several of the traditional ways of organizing. They began to explore moving more to have this mode be the normal mode (CFAR, 1998).

5. ***At the right moment, explicitly put board effectiveness on the agenda.*** This association after the above actions created momentum in what might be called a stealth phase of board development and created a board effectiveness task force to accelerate this process (Hirschhorn and May, 2000).

6. ***Welcome outside perspectives on options for improvement.*** The board effectiveness group began its work by inviting members to think about other boards that they were on and when they felt most engaged. Boards develop their own distinctive cultures such that each new member defers to it, even when a new member has many different experiences in other boards that they want to bring forward. This organization was not even aware of what other boards each member was on, even though those connections are social capital for many of the substantive issues (Alderfer, 1986).

7. ***Work rapidly and close to the organizations' real issues and culture.*** Board development is a vast and growing field, with consulting firms, instruments, associations, principles, etc., that inadvertently can become ends rather than tools to advance the vital, strategic work of this particular organization. Any new processes should be background or infrastructure to carry deeper thinking.

8. ***Crack the bottleneck of the chair and CEO.*** Often the board's agenda and its development are too tied up in the two most overloaded members of the system. In this case, the chair and the president were able to model being a productive pair (CFAR, 1998a). A norm was created that at least one staff member and one board member, often working with a larger group, owned each agenda item. This pair would work before any meeting on the frame of the issue, the materials that would go out, how the allotted time at the board meeting would be used and what the followup would be. This ensured that every issue had at least one other staff member and one other board member who was invested in that agenda item and usually many more from both side. Over time, board members were often the champions of using brief small groups or individual thinking time before decisions or consultation (CFAR, 1998b).

9. ***Create a bias against presentations.*** Board members come alive when they are given well-structured processes to address complex, high-stakes issues, in conversation with their colleagues. E. M. Forster said, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say." For many, talking with interesting others is actively thinking, not just downloading preset points of view. In this organization, the amount of total board time given to presentations has dropped dramatically, yet the feedback shows members still want even less of it. Drive informing the board into e-mail and advance mailings; be clear when it is just background versus when they need to have read it to engage at the meeting and make explicit the role of the board on that specific issue.

10. ***Work as much on the before and after the meeting as the meeting itself.*** This organization has developed a growing repertoire of ways of engaging the board before and after sessions. For example, before one meeting, one issue a week was e-mailed to members, with a page of facts and a focused question so that the dialogue began before the meeting. They are now doing rapid e-mail notes on key discussions to send to board members within 24 hours of the meeting so that they can forward them to interested others or contribute afterthoughts on particular issues.

11. ***Craft agendas with a mix of issues at different stages of development.*** This organization actively looks to mix agendas such that there are some issues that call for early thinking and brainstorming type input and advice on whether and how the organization should take up this issue. Others are at the stage of reviewing options. A few are ready for decisions. The modes of engagement should differ because the role of the board differs in these distinct contexts. For example, when an issue is early on and being explored, the leadership for that discussion is the board-staff pair who has brought the issue forward. The practice is to ask board members to comment thematically rather than via an artificial process of going in the sequence of who indicated that they wanted to make a point. The board leader asks for related comments first, then invites a new aspect to be put into play. However, when an issue is up for a vote, the leadership shifts to the chair of the board, and each member is taken in the order of their signaling intent to make a point.

12. ***Think over the annual rhythm.*** Board meetings are often like black holes that suck energy before, during and after their occurrence, but then are loosely linked to the ongoing business. This organization has evolved an overall cycle, driven by strategic thinking, budgeting and follow-through on the critical issues. They have one summer meeting in a retreat format where they take up a few significant issues and engage in scanning for emerging threats and opportunities.

13. ***Think of agendas as intertwined issues under the umbrella of the overall strategy.*** As the board has become better at tapping the knowledge-capital resident in its members on particular issues, there became an issue-encapsulation risk. People would talk about an international initiative without linking it to investments in distance learning that were talked about three items earlier. Now the board chair and president jointly craft a memorandum

at the front of the board book that explore the linkages of the issues to one another, to previous meetings and to the overall strategy. Furthermore, in the meeting, when a board-staff pair is taking up leadership on an issue, the chair and president make their contributions in linking the issue on the table to the wider context.

14. ***Work on the relationships of the board to other groups such as the executive committee and the committees.*** It is easy in an overloaded board meeting, while being power pointed to death, to imagine that the really interesting conversations are taking place elsewhere. Yet often the secret is that everyone is frustrated. The most common dynamic is to think the executive committee is the real inner circle. This can deenergize the rest of the board. After one meeting where most of the key issues had been chewed over by the executive committee, the leadership realized this dynamic because executive members were least active in the board's discussion and were less energized by the wider conversation. Now the executive committee's role is to set the agendas and the assignments of resources but not to be a pre-decisional group. They can set parameters on major issues but should not have the meeting before the meeting, etc., that deadens the thinking of the full board. Where a decision has been made by the executive committee or a committee, then it is honestly reported and the work shifts to the implementation or some other open aspect of the issue.

15. ***Grow a richer vocabulary of modes of working and learn how best to match them to the different types of issues.*** Over time, this organization has grown a rich array of different ways of working with issues (Shure, 1996; Gilmore, 1997; Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1997). Below are listed some of the modes:

◆ Full-board deliberation on an issue ready for a vote, plenary, turn taking for all who want to express their views, call for the vote.

◆ Full-board conversation at a divergent stage of issue development. Led by board-member/staff pair, facilitated thematically rather than by calling on people, sometimes using a straw vote to get a sense of which aspects remain controversial or need more discussion, sometimes using a final written response to a focused question at the end to give the assigned committee the benefit of every members' afterthoughts at the end of a rich discussion.

◆ Individual thinking and jotting down key points. Before beginning a discussion, the leader invites people to take three – four minutes to re-skim the advance material and their notes and to jot down their thoughts, options or ideas about the degree of threat of this issue, etc. Then open up the discussion. In research we did for the 3M corporation on meetings, people's advance preparation for an agenda item that they are not responsible for is less than a few minutes. By simply having individuals collect their thoughts before a discussion, it can significantly increase thoughtfulness.

◆ Quick conversations with colleagues seated nearby, just a chance for two – four people to find their voice on a topic, explore similarities and differences prior to a full-group conversation.

◆ Small groups, either random or with planned members based on expertise or point of view, from 15 – 45 minutes, with clear assignment, sometimes all on the same key topic, sometimes each with a different aspect or some combination. Often it is best in the same room versus going to separate spaces.

◆ Panel conversations—a few members (the leaders of existing committees or ad hoc groups) talking together about an issue.

◆ Briefings—quick overview of an issue, with facts, data and a clear sense of why all need to have this information to fulfill their fiduciary roles.

◆ Substantive presentations—an outside presentation on a major new trend or topic that will be a shaping force for the years to come.

All of the above in various combinations over time can contribute to a vibrant, learning board that, in turn, is able to live into its fiduciary and strategic counselor role.

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