

Serving on a Ministry Board with Excellence

It's an honor to serve – but much more!!!

by Joyce Godwin



The Romans had a word for it. They called it "quinta essential." They believed everything in the world was made up of four basic elements: air, earth, fire, and water.

Man did not fit into that definition. There was obviously something more—something that set man apart from the rest of creation.

They reasoned there had to be a fifth element, a "quinta essential," that gave man the power to think and talk, and that caused him to seek after God. Over the centuries, the word "quintessential" has taken on broader meanings, e.g., the purest, the most perfect.

Ministry boards today seem to focus on policies, revenue, expense, and reserves, but little thought is given to the "fifth element," the quintessential, the quality that separates the very good from the very best.

What are the "fifth element" qualities for ministry board members? To reach the quintessential level, a board member must:

- **Be committed to the values embodied in the organization's mission statement and statement of faith.** These statements set forth the reason for the organization's existence. A good director must be able to reflect critically on governance issues in

light of the beliefs expressed in the ministry's mission statement and statement of faith.

Board members of Christian ministries bring a wealth of religious experience and deep faith commitments. Board interactions should deepen the practical wisdom and enrich the ways of expressing faith. These interactions are one of the joys of board service.

- **Respect the CEO and staff.** An effective working relationship with the CEO is the trademark of board excellence and is a must if the ministry is to grow and fulfill

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its mission. The CEO is effectively the board's only employee since the other employees work for the CEO.

An experienced director is a sounding board for the CEO. Directors who get absorbed in operating details are doing management's job and can't provide the appropriate check and balance to management.

Directors may have many interactions with other staff through committee work or special projects, but board members must resist even the appearance of supervising the staff, giving them assignments, or discussing issues internal to

the organization. The NIFO principle is worth considering: "Nose in, fingers out."

- **Make time for the board.** Board service involves a lot more than attending meetings. Proper preparation for meetings means setting aside time to read not only the materials sent for a specific meeting or board-related assignment but also studying other pertinent information on ministries and governance.

It is the responsibility of management to see that a board member's time is effectively engaged. Packets for board meetings should be sent to board members with adequate time for thorough preparation. Written materials should provide executive summaries and not overwhelm the board member with minutiae. What's in the pre-meeting packet should not be repeated in oral presentations at meetings. Otherwise, the board member is being "trained" not to read the material in advance!

Board meeting time should be organized to allow for value-added discussion and decision-making. Periodically board members should evaluate the quality and quantity of materials presented before, during, and subsequent to board meetings.

Directors who serve on board committees should have the time, expertise, and interest to devote to this additional responsibility. Well-functioning committees make effective use of actual board meeting time and are an attribute of excellence in governance.

- **Be courageous.** Boards must often make difficult decisions. It takes courage to hire, fire, and/or establish the compensation for

the CEO, to merge the organization with another ministry, or even to determine the ministry has fulfilled its mission and should be disbanded. Decisions such as allocating scarce resources are more mundane but also take courage.

It may take courage to challenge the management or other board members, especially when colleagues are acting inappropriately. Divergent views on a board are good: disagreeing agreeably is the key. Expressing dissent gracefully is an art—but vital to peaceful deliberations on an issue. Once a board decision is made, all members must understand they now speak with one voice in supporting the decision.

- **Keep eyes fixed on the big picture.** Strategic thinking is learned—not an instinctive

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behavior. Good board members are disciplined to keep their eyes on the horizon. A good sign a board is focusing on the big picture is when these magic words are often heard during board meetings: “The issue seems to be an administrative matter that staff should handle.”

- **Be committed to set and maintain high standards for the ministry.** Time should be set aside to regularly review the values, vision, mission, goals, strategies, and performance of the ministry, the CEO, and the board.

What gets evaluated gets measured! What gets measured gets done!

- **Apply the specific expertise they bring to the board.** Diversity of backgrounds, including age, experience, and expertise, enhances board deliberations. Key areas of expertise needed for all boards include finance, development, legal, and business management. ☺

Joyce Godwin formerly served as ECFA board chair and is a recognized expert on board governance issues. She will be a presenter and discussion leader at ECFA's regional workshops (see announcement below).

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