



The Juvenile Stage of Governance

What to do about Junior?

By Michael Burns

What may be considered a best practice for a board in a certain stage of development may not be the best idea for a board in another stage of development.

Not all boards are created equal, or least they are not all at the same stage of development. Would you treat an infant the same way you would treat an adult? Probably not, and neither should you manage a board of a

start-up organization the same way you would a board of a seasoned organization.

Management literature has long recognized that organizations - like other living things - experience phases of growth and decline. The precise number of stages attributed to a typical organizational life cycle varies, depends on who you talk to. But, most agree that organizations experience growth stages in some form similar to the following:

Infancy

Start-up or start over. Board's disposition - The board's perspective is that if they don't do it, no one will. The board's focus is on operations. (See part one of series, NENPQ Summer 1997).

Juvenile

Growth. Board's disposition - The board is clear that they must do a great deal of what must be done (operationally), but accept that it is OK to have help. The board's primary focus is still on operations.

Adolescence

Growth and decline spurts. Board's disposition - The board's mandate is not always clear to itself and others. The board may regularly debate with staff about what they must or must not do regarding governance or operations.

Maturity

Established. Board's disposition - The board is clear about what they must do (basically governance) and how it must do it.

Part two of a three part series on organizational lifecycles and their affect on a governing board's development within a nonprofit organization.

In this installment of our three part series on the lifecycles of board management we will examine the juvenile stage.

The Juvenile Stage

Governing bodies in the juvenile stage of board development usually get little, if any, attention in academic readings. This is because the stage is relatively uneventful and usually only moderately stressful, particularly compared to the infancy and adolescent stages. Entrance into the juvenile stage signals that the board has successfully transitioned from infancy - a stage in which each board member is actively involved in the daily operational work of the organization. Typically during infancy, long-range planning, policy development and evaluation are given a back-seat to the immediacy of the daily demands of operations. Survival of this infancy stage provides breathing space and a window of opportunity for all to recognize the yet unaddressed, long-range, core needs of the organization. The following case study best illustrates life in the juvenile stage:

CASE STUDY

Hope Neighborhood Development

Three years ago, Natale had a dream that her twenty-block neighborhood could be clean, safe for all the kids, and, well, a neighborhood. Back then, next door neighbors would come home from work to their rented apartments and lock themselves in for the night. People living in the suburbs owned most buildings in the area. Few property owners did much to keep their buildings in good shape and the neighborhood had begun to slowly deteriorate.

Natale knew something had to be done soon. She invited her neighbors to meet with her about what was happening. Only five or six people attended the first few meetings held over a nine-month period. But, lots of effort to get more bodies (and their minds) to the meetings produced a group of neighbors ready to make change. They organized, incorporated, and created a nonprofit organization.

Planning

The first couple of years following incorporation were really challenging. Having no employees meant that Natale and her board did everything - call and manage meetings, seek financial support, print flyers and stuff envelopes - everything! Everyone knew that there was a lot of work to get done in order to achieve their mission. But, there was no way they could keep putting in the time and energy they were giving without burning-out.

One day they met to discuss their future as an organization. Everybody agreed they needed someone to take care of the day-to-day operations and save the board from the burn-out that would eventually result. It was decided to raise funds to hire a paid coordinator. Their efforts paid off when the city awarded them \$15,000 from Community Development Block Grant money.

The juvenile stage is earmarked first by the board's taking time out to look beyond the organization's day-to-day needs. While reviewing the past, the board will probably make some resolutions about what they would like the work of the organization to look like and how they will function. They may consider setting down rules about the way the organization will work. In the process, they will be conducting their first evaluation and in effect, making the transition from an operations-focused board to a board with some concern about governing.

Roles

During the board's infancy stage, Natale kept her board focused on day-to-day operations. With the hiring of a staff-person and the board's recent brush with burnout, Natale questioned what the proper role of the board should be for the future. With a part-time staff person, maybe things would be a little different; but she surmised the board would still have to do some work to make things go. Natale knew that other boards did not spend their time doing operations, but she also felt that they had little choice.

In the board's juvenile stage, the organization needs do not initially change from the infancy stage. Depending on the organization's access to resources, board members may still be active in doing the work of the organization (from cleaning to service to administration). As was true in the infancy stage, without the board's involvement in some of the day-to-day operations, there may be no service. At the same time, some organizations may have enough resources to allow the board to skip this stage and proceed to adolescence. The availability of resources most determines what will be demanded of the board in terms of their role and responsibility. Where resources are actually plentiful, the board may be able to focus singularly on governance activities: policy development, long range planning, evaluation and maybe, fund development.

Composition

When the new staff was brought on, the board had a lot of discussion about what their job would now be. Some members really liked doing the day-to-day work and were worried they would not have much to do if they stayed on the board. The staff and chair assured everyone there was plenty of work to be done. Just the same, some folks left the board saying "their work was done and they should make room on the board for someone who would know more."

In the juvenile stage, founding board members often empty board seats. The result is an opportunity for the whole board to think of their needs. These needs have changed and this is an ideal time to be intentional about who should be a board member. Some boards in this stage may set up a nominating committee to recruit new members. Often enough, the only criteria: the ability to raise money.

Structure

The first staff person was hired by a committee of the board. This committee was the first no-operations focused committee the board ever had. However, the committee was not perfect in the eyes of everyone though. Some board members questioned the judgement of the committee at every step. They were not sure a part-timer would meet the organization's needs. They thought that too much money was being offered. They were not sure the committee's best candidate was really what the organization needed; etc., etc., etc.

Eventually though, Natale, the board chair, was able to get agreement around the committee's recommendation. In addition, this experience gave all the board enough confidence to agree that a committee for planning should be set-up. They also agreed that a fund raising committee (since they had all been the committee) should be started. Only one person was willing to join this committee though. Most members had the feeling they were going to be stuck doing all the fundraising if they joined.

In the juvenile stage, the board sets up committees that think about the operations, does some operational activity, and thinks about the future. In this stage, the de-facto executive committee, the officers, may get official power to act when there is a problem.

SURVIVING THE JUVENILE STAGE

PRINCIPLES TO KEEP IN MIND

- Accept that the first time hiring of staff does not make all the work go away. The first staff is not a panacea for addressing all the demands of the infancy stage. The board must stay clear about their needs and hire staff to match the needs they themselves cannot or will not continue to address. If, as is common, the board believes that one of the founders (e.g. the chair) might make the best first staff, this is possible - if every effort is made to recognize that as staff this puts the chair in a different position with different expectations and responsibilities than as chair. Recognition of this fact will be important for everyone's sanity.

- Work within the limits of staff and board and do not engage in activities that exceed the board and staff's capacity. In other words, do not bite off more than you can chew. Taking on too much is a habit easily acquired in the infancy stage but equally devastating in the long term. If Natale and her board are not able to set realistic objectives, they will find themselves spending a lost more time focused on failure and frustration - good people will be lost and it will be harder to recruit new people.

- The first time hiring of staff ushers in an opportunity for beginning to take snapshots of what the long range future might look like for the organization - this is an opportunity to think about planning.

- Board members are at a high-risk of burn-out during this stage - great care must be given to balancing work with "play" and celebrating success, and not engaging as an organization in more than is reasonable or feasible for its board and staff.

DO'S AND DON'TS IN THE JUVENILE STAGE

Composition

Recruit individuals who have passion for the mission and the work of the organization, and are willing to take on more than governance tasks (folks who have volunteered or are current clients are good prospects). Board members may be tired. Orient new recruits to this fact and be sure to share the history of the board to date.

Structure

Don't try to make too many committees, particularly operational committees. But do consider developing a strong nominating committee that has some responsibility for keeping the rest of the board in good spirit.

Roles and Responsibilities

Begin to balance the young board's need to stay involved in tasks of providing services or fulfilling other operational needs, with a growing focus on the tasks of governance (such as policy, planning and evaluation).

Focus

The squeaky wheels of immediate day-to-day operational needs will continue to get attention from your young board (because otherwise there would be no one to pay attention), but work hard at finding and creating the time to begin thinking about the organization's future.

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