

# FIVE STEPS TO HEALING A DYSFUNCTIONAL BOARD

by  
Mark D. Alcorn, J.D., M.B.A.

One of our recent articles discussed *The Top Ten Signs of a Dysfunctional Board*. In this article, we will discuss a few ideas you may be able to use to improve the functionality of your board.

The challenging part of improving board function is the fact that doing so entails change. *If key factors don't change, your board won't change*. Change might entail a shift in power from old leaders to new leaders, or a transformation of the culture of the organization, among other things. The fact that a leader is overbearing, that the board is unable to make decisions, or that the decision making process is weak or unevenly applied, will hinder change. Further, these kinds of changes are difficult, and fierce resistance to them should be anticipated. Our recommended steps for improving board function are as follows:

**Step 1: Get Vision.** Focus on a compelling vision is essential to change, and positive change is scarce without it. Vision motivates, excites, and builds bonds between leaders. When a compelling vision is articulated, the urgency and purpose is magnified. A strong sense of urgency and purpose help board members focus on what really matters: abandoning old struggles and getting the job done.

**Step 2: Clear the Air.** Once a compelling vision exists, it is very helpful to fully “air” as many of the issues as possible that exist within the leadership. It is likely many strong feelings have gone unexpressed because it was unsafe to do so. Whether the emperor has no clothes, or the rhinoceros on the table is starting to stink, it is absolutely essential that leaders feel heard, and that the board is able to face the truth, and the real issues. It is inappropriate to try to solve these issues at this point. The focus should be on open, honest communication -- the basis for trust and openness among board members.

**Step 3: Agree on a Process.** A clear decision making process is a key element of successful board function. *Process* is the mechanism boards use to bring forth ideas, consider and test them, and reject or adopt them. A strong process will ensure that new ideas are uniformly considered, and that the actions taken are sound and truly supported by the group as a whole. *Process* also helps limit personalization of issues (ideas, not people, are tested), and handles the issues with fairness and consistency.

## Five Steps to Healing a Dysfunctional Board

2

**Step 4: Educate and Train.** Most association leaders are very intelligent and committed, but don't have a deep understanding of association board dynamics. They must understand *what* a board does, their *roles* as directors, and the role of staff, among other things. They must know enough to refuse to permit the loudest and/or most aggressive leader to control the board, or to allow a president/chairperson to determine the organization's agenda during his/her term. Ideally, a strong board will refuse to tolerate disruptive or disloyal leaders, but value thoughtful, constructive differences of opinion. Leaders who engage in dysfunctional behavior will be unable to maintain power and influence over a well-trained board. As such, education and training are critical.

**Step 5: Get Facilitation.** All of us have seen how quickly we revert to our old processes and routines, despite an exciting new vision or business plan. Because we use these same old processes and routines, change frequently fails. This is a difficult pattern to break. For this reason, it makes sense to get an independent facilitator to help the board identify and get started with the agreed-upon change, and to help implement and stick to its decision making processes. Note - a consultant cannot take power from an overbearing leader; only the board can (or should) do that.

These brief descriptions merely scratch the surface of key steps to improving your board. Every board is different. What works with one board might be ill-timed, or otherwise inappropriate for another board. If you would like to talk to us about these ideas or improving your board, please do not hesitate to call. We look forward to hearing from you.

*Copyright 2002, Mark D. Alcorn, J.D., M.B.A. All rights reserved.*

*Mark Alcorn is a Sacramento-based lawyer and management consultant and founded Alcorn Associates in 1997. Mark holds a Juris Doctorate from the McGeorge School of Law, University of the Pacific, and a Master of Business Administration from California State University at Sacramento. Alcorn Associates focuses on meeting the legal and management consulting needs of non-profit organization executives and their boards. Mark can be reached at (916) 444-5959, or via e-mail at mark@alcornlaw.com.*