

## LEARNING PAPER

# Five Year Reflection: Aligning Board and Staff

**Published:** October 2017

**Contributors:** Pam Moret and Jen Ford Reedy

Five years ago, we stepped into the roles of Board Chair and President of the Foundation together. At the time, board and staff members were unanimous in wanting to improve board-staff engagement and alignment.

In the four years before we assumed our roles, the Foundation underwent a major strategic shift and as part of that shift the roles of board and staff changed. The changes included moving the board from being almost exclusively focused on grantmaking to no involvement in grantmaking at all. This left board members feeling removed from the work and unclear how they could most effectively oversee and shape the Foundation. Staff felt like they were trying to do what the board wanted, but just couldn't get it right. This was compounded by the fact that the board and staff simply didn't know each other, due both to high staff turnover and limited board and staff member interaction.

The structure of governance had changed considerably — new committees, new meeting format, etc. — but we had not yet developed the working norms for us all to feel like we understood each other and had shared expectations. In other words, we had focused on the "hardware" — like charters, agendas and policies — but had not invested enough in the "software" — relationships, trust and accountability. We have learned, not surprisingly, that both are critical to a high-performing Foundation.

In 2012, we identified improving board-staff relations as one of our highest priorities. By 2013, board members felt we were improving, but still rated our "board and board-management relations" as a 3.1 on a 5-point scale, according to the board engagement survey that we conduct every two years. Fast-forward to 2017, and board members now rate us a 4.85, with 85 percent of board members rating us a 5.

We did a number of things that we believe contributed to this change. As we reflect, we see five main operating practices that made the greatest difference:

## **1. VALUE AND TRUST EACH OTHER**

A strong board-staff relationship requires valuing each other's contributions. The board has to appreciate the commitment and expertise of the staff, and the staff has to appreciate the ways that the board can make them better. At the heart of this relationship is, not surprisingly, trust. The board needs to be able to provide frank and honest feedback — which is crucial because Foundation staff might not get much of it in the community — and the board must trust that the staff will hear it in the spirit of wanting to increase our impact. The staff members need to be able to be candid about failures and shortcomings, and trust the board will hear it in the spirit of wanting to increase our impact. Each side needs to believe they are on the same team. And everyone must be committed to making the team better and better.

All of the practices described in this paper contribute to the degree to which we value and trust each other. Toward this specific end, we think these tactics have been particularly powerful:

### **INVEST REAL TIME IN REAL RELATIONSHIPS.**

We created more time and space to get to know each other as people and understanding what backgrounds and perspectives we bring to our work. To build relationships among board members we intentionally add activities and discussions designed to build social capital to the agenda — for example,

activities like breaking into pairs to discuss perspectives on a particular question or a reading. In terms of board-staff relationships, we reduced the amount of time the board spent in executive session without staff. Management team members attend at least some part of every board meeting and engage directly with board members on a regular basis. To foster relationships between board members and the entire staff we invite individual board members to come and share their personal story with all staff members, and we hold annual lunches with all staff and board members in small groups to share a meal and free-ranging conversation.

When we say real time, we mean real time. In the past year, we've spent seven hours outside of board meetings specifically focused on building relationships. That represents 17 percent of the time the board spent together as a full group. This figure only includes that time dedicated to personal connection, and we incorporate personal sharing into other parts of our work together as well.

### **BUILD INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE.**

We have invested much time and energy at the staff level on building intercultural competence, which we see as an absolutely critical skill for philanthropy. We have adapted that work for the board, recognizing the board has less time together as an entity to practice and reflect. Our work is focused on understanding one's own background and mindsets first, then seeking to understand how one's background and mindset may be different from others, and then learning to adapt to build understanding across differences. This is a critical skillset both in the boardroom and out in the community. We brought the board into this work first with a workshop that built a baseline understanding of the approach and then by incorporating the practice into our board work. For example, on board retreats we frame reflection questions to examine our own reactions to what we experience. We know this requires continuous work and practice, and we are dedicated to it.

### **BE CANDID.**

This is more of a mindset than a specific tactic, but it is so critical that we want to call it out. Having staff members share unvarnished truths is an essential element in developing and maintaining trust. A few examples: sharing the most negative comments we receive on a grantee survey and how staff is responding to them, or sharing the things that didn't go well when we tried a new tactic and how staff is fixing them. This gives the board confidence that the staff is forthcoming, reflective and focused on improvement. It allows the board to spend more time in counseling mode — rather than fault-finding, hidden-issue-seeking mode.

## **2. GET REAL BOARD INPUT, AT THE RIGHT TIME**

If you truly believe the board can make the work of the organization better, you have to design your work to allow them to do just that. This means collecting input in the right way at the right time. We work hard to plan our work well in advance to ensure we are bringing ideas to the board at the earliest viable moment, so board members are able to provide input before staff members or projects get too far down the road. We have established an annual planning cycle for our strategic initiatives, based on getting different levels of input from the board at each stage.

In the past 18 months, we have had two big ideas that staff members brought to the board that were subsequently dropped. We view this not as a failure, but as a giant success. Staff brought the ideas very early, and the board respectfully raised questions and made suggestions. After considering the board's input, staff made the decision to drop the ideas and go a different direction. No one's feelings were hurt. No one was frustrated. We all felt good about the outcomes.

We believe two tactics are particularly important on this front:

### **PLAN AND PRIORITIZE BOARD TIME.**

Our overall approach has been to make sure the board sees any decision coming long before they need to make it and has plenty of time to vet and discuss. Each

year as staff members develop our strategic priorities for the year, they outline exactly how and when they plan to engage the board and board committees on each priority. Staff members also suggest learning priorities for the board based on where they see our work headed in the future. Staff then proposes an annual plan for how we will use the board's time the following year — based on these strategic priorities and learning priorities — and discusses it with the Governance Committee followed by the full board. The plan includes the topics to be covered at each meeting for the next year.

### **USE "STRATEGY SHORTS."**

We created a highly successful "strategy shorts" format that allows us to receive board input early. Staff members prepare a one to two page pre-reading memo explaining an idea and giving an assessment of options. During the meeting, staff members give a quick reminder of the idea (less than 2 minutes), and then sit silently and take notes while board members ask questions and make suggestions for staff to consider as they develop the idea. We allow 15 minutes maximum per strategy short. Although it is sometimes hard for staff not to respond, we have found it really fosters good thinking (it has a brainstorming feel) and ensures we hear every board member's thoughts.

## **3. CONNECT TO THE WORK — IN AND OUT OF THE BOARDROOM**

The work of a Foundation can sometimes feel abstract and removed from the real action of change, particularly for board members who are absorbing the work through staff memos. We delegate as many tasks and responsibilities as possible outside of the boardroom. Foundation business mostly happens at the committee level, with only brief reports to the full board. Grantmaking mostly happens at the staff level, with the board providing input on only the largest grant ideas. If there's a major new strategic issue, we create an ad hoc board committee to handle it. In the past year, 26 percent of board meeting time was

spent on committee reports, management reports and board business. This leaves ample time for strategy and learning.

We have tried to use that time to better connect the board to the Foundation's work. We bring in grantees and experts to provide context and counsel. We have held several board meetings and board dinners offsite at locations that can help board members gain perspective on our work. We have introduced the idea of "strategy audits" to assess how well what the board originally saw and affirmed as a strategy matches what actually happened. We have asked grantees to film themselves describing the lessons and impact of their work and then embedded clips of those grantees in the staff presentation to the board. We invited a Bush Fellow to come in and say anything they wanted to the board — anything at all they thought our board should know or consider. In our successful first test of this tactic, we invited a Bush Fellow who is president of the Minneapolis NAACP and an expert in criminal justice. He shared his personal story, spoke about criminal justice issues, and gave suggestions for improvement to the Bush Fellows program.

Two other tactics we think have been particularly important are:

### **HIGH-ENGAGEMENT BOARD RETREATS.**

We do a two-day board retreat annually, with one day of learning and one day of regular board meeting. We have found that the most powerful format is to travel to a town in our region and have the board members learn about that place and how the Foundation's work manifests itself there. We have scheduled grantee convenings and stakeholder receptions at the same time as the retreat, so the board can interact with as many people as possible who can intimately describe their community and work and provide unfiltered feedback on the ways the Foundation is or is not helpful. In our last retreat in Fargo, N.D., board members had the opportunity to learn from scores of community leaders and those community leaders had the opportunity to influence board members.

### **INVOLVING THE BOARD DIRECTLY IN THE WORK.**

Every year, we try to include at least one board member in all of our major selection processes and events, such as selecting Bush Fellows or giving welcoming remarks at a reception. This allows board members to truly experience the staff's work, which gives greater meaning to boardroom discussions. This also helps ensure that board and staff are aligned and that what the staff is actually doing matches board expectations.

## **4. GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE AND HOLD EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE**

Like any institution, we are really just a bunch of people. The success of the institution hinges on, more than any other factor, getting the right people and ensuring they are performing well.

Making all the ideas in this paper work is easier if you have people who are aligned with them in spirit. And all of the practices in this paper are easier if you have a culture and systems that support honest feedback and performance improvement.

We have tried to attract the right people and hold each other accountable in these ways:

### **TAKE BOARD AND PRESIDENT SUCCESSION VERY SERIOUSLY.**

We've put a great deal of thought into the attributes we want in board members — both those attributes on which we want diversity and those attributes we want uniformity. We have set specific targets for those attributes on which we are seeking diversity. For example, our last five-year board composition plan focused on geographic and racial diversity, as well as increasing the number of board members who are alumni of our programs. As an aside, we met those goals, and are working on a new plan now. More recently, we formalized the set of attributes that we are looking for in every board member. (See below: *What We Are Looking For In Bush Foundation Board Members.*) We are using these to guide our board cultivation process, including doing discreet reference checks

to confirm that each candidate has these attributes before we ever reach out to them about the possibility of board service.

On the presidential front, we have made succession planning an annual topic for our Executive Committee. Each January, we update a plan for how we would manage the process and review a set of attributes of what we would be seeking in a new President. The current President also shares her opinion on who might be good prospects.

### **TAKE BOARD AND PRESIDENT PERFORMANCE REVIEWS VERY SERIOUSLY.**

It is not easy for board peers to give each other real feedback, but we do it. It starts with feedback after a board member's first year. Then, we have an annual board performance survey, eliciting feedback on the contributions of every individual board member. That feedback is then discussed with each board member by the Governance Committee Chair and/or the Board Chair. Each time a board member is up for renewal, we consider the feedback from the surveys, how the board member has responded to the feedback, and what contributions they have made in and out of board meetings. We also consider whether or not the board member has the attributes we believe are most important for the Foundation at that moment in time. This is not a pro forma process. In the past few years, we have not renewed terms for three board members, who were all terrific people and engaged board members, but did not fit the attributes we were looking for at that time. In addition to these formal processes, hold each other to high standards of performance in real time. For example, board members generally intervene with each other when a board comment gets too far into management details.

For the President, the Board Chair leads an annual performance review based on survey input from all board members, discussion with committees and individual board members, and a full board discussion. To ensure the board has insight into how staff members really feel about the President and the state of the Foundation, we have created a two-year cycle of getting direct input. Every other year we give all staff members the opportunity to share anonymous feedback about the President that will go, unedited, to the Board Chair. In the off



years, the Board Chair does skip-conversations with the President's direct reports.

## 5. BE BUSH

We want to have the right people. We also want to make sure we have a culture that transcends any changes in personnel. We want to ensure the board and staff have a shared appreciation for our operating values. We want to ensure the board and staff have a shared understanding of our "Bush way" of working. Finally, we want to have a Bush Foundation culture that ties us all together and links us to board and staff members that preceded us and those that will follow us. We accomplish this with tactics such as:

- Begin every board agenda by showing our strategy framework and showing how the topics for discussion fit into the framework and advance our purpose.

- Annually review our operating values and how they are working for us.

- Have staff members present activities that might be under the board's radar but exemplify our values.

- Hold philanthropic strategy workshops centered on an articulation of a Bush approach.

- Document our practices — like this learning paper — in ways we hope will be useful to others and reinforce our own standard for ourselves.

## CONCLUSION

We believe the board and staff of the Bush Foundation have a very strong and healthy working relationship. Unusually so, in our experience. This has been the product of highly intentional work and will only be maintained through ongoing intentional work.

This intentional work has been in policy, practice and spirit. We started this learning paper focused on valuing and trusting each other, and that remains the most critical component.

Good staff work makes governance much better. Good governance makes staff work much better. Good staff work and good governance combined make the Bush Foundation much better.