

The Seven Things That Only a Board of Directors Can Do

By Henry S. Givray



Opportunities abound for associations, professional societies and other volunteer-governed organizations to make tangible and far-reaching contributions to their members, industries, professions and causes. These types of organizations represent communities of individuals who share a commitment, passion and vested interests. Those who also volunteer to serve on their organization's board of directors and committees give willingly of their time, energy, dollars and heart but receive no compensation. Properly harnessed, this powerful, collective human force offers limitless opportunities to advance ideas, take action, drive desired outcomes, create value for individual stakeholders and improve the state or condition of an industry or profession.

However, the inherent hurdles and challenges such organizations face are formidable. By their very nature, these organizations operate in an environment of planned and rapid turnover. They are subject to varying and often conflicting objectives, discontinuous interactions and fragile commitments of time-pressed volunteer board members who are expected to serve as stewards of the organization's success and long-term vitality.

Many factors will determine whether a volunteer board can successfully overcome both inherent and situational challenges, but one stands out: how and on what the organization's board, as a unit, spends its time. Either explicitly or by default, a board decides how to spend its limited time together. It determines what to commit time to, and what to delegate, defer or altogether dismiss.

For example, a board can spend time on improving operations, preparing budgets, selecting conference speakers, setting

prices for its products and services, evaluating future conference sites, responding to member complaints, reviewing committee reports and countless other agenda topics. Deciding whether these and other similar activities are better handled by committees and staff may depend on their deemed urgency, board standard practice or an organization's norms and customs.


However, the following set of decisions and actions represent the seven things that only a board of directors can do.

They are the responsibilities and commitments that a board must not delegate, defer or dismiss, but rather prioritize above all else. In fact, a board must ensure that quality time and processes are in place to deliberate and address them.



1. **Define** and **ensure** alignment of the organization's fundamental purpose for existence. Who are we? What do we do? Why do we do it? For whom do we do it?
2. **Articulate, align, nurture** and **preserve** the organization's core values. These are the essential and enduring principles that define the organization's heart and soul, determine its character and provide meaningful guides for decisions, actions and behaviors. They are never compromised for either individual or organizational financial gain, self-interest or short-term expediency.
3. **Develop** and **maintain** an effective governance framework comprising both a clear and functioning governance *structure* and a well-articulated, aligned and enduring governance *culture*.





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4. **Chart** the organization’s future course by answering the following questions:

- a. Where are we going? (create the vision; set strategic direction and priorities)
- b. How will we get there? (develop strategies; review and approve action plans)
- c. When will we get there? (determine resource allocation and funding priorities)
- d. How will we know when we get there? (determine key metrics and monitor results)

5. **Ensure** the organization stays on track by:

- a. Determining, prioritizing, allocating resources, and monitoring programs and initiatives consistent with its mission, values and strategic direction;
- b. Providing proper financial oversight;
- c. Monitoring and evaluating the performance of staff resources – paid in volunteer;
- d. Determining how problems and opportunities are framed and approached; and
- e. Negotiating and balancing staying the course vs. making incremental or transformational change consistent with current and emerging stakeholder needs and market conditions.

6. **Communicate, clarify** and **provide context** for the organization’s vision, purpose, core values, strategies and policies with members, partners and other stakeholders.

7. **Identify, select, develop** and **set the standards** for the organization’s leaders — today and into the future.

Having skilled, dedicated and credible individuals serve on the boards of volunteer-governed organizations is not enough to ensure long-term success and vitality. Volunteer boards must also allocate and focus their time and energy on the seven things that *only* they can do. Doing so gives the organizations they serve the highest chance to achieve their missions and deliver on their promises, today and into the future. Moreover, individual board members are able to maximize the rewards they themselves take away from their service, thus increasing the likelihood that they will stay engaged and making it easier to attract other quality volunteers. •

Henry S. Givray is former Chairman, President & CEO of Smithbucklin Corporation, the world’s largest association management and services company. He served as President & CEO from 2002 to 2015 and Chairman of the Board (non-executive) from 2016 to 2020. Henry is a dedicated, ongoing student of leadership, committed to speaking and writing as a way to teach and give back. His insights and ideas on leadership have been prominently featured in business books and national news media, and he has been invited to speak at numerous association conferences, corporate meetings, and educational forums. One of Henry’s most enduring achievements has been his creation of comprehensive, high-impact leadership learning programs. The programming has evolved to include two offerings under the brand Leadership’s Calling®. The Diverse Cohort Program is for CEOs and other C-suite executives, vice presidents, directors and managers at all levels, business owners, entrepreneurs, individual practitioners, and high-potentials from all types and sizes of organizations representing varied industries and professions. The second offering is an exclusive program for a CEO (or head of an organization) and members of his or her senior management team, participating together.