Governance & Ethics Q&A December 2012
Articulating Ethical Values

Q If a board is responsible for articulating the ethical values of their organization, how would they know what those are?

A
The board is responsible for articulating the ethical values as they want them to be, not as they are. It's not just a research project. However, the Values Statement will never be accepted if it fails to honour the positive ethical values already in use in an established organization. So this is a multi-step process and research is very valuable in supporting the development of a Values Statement.

Vision and Values for a Better World
Start with the external values, not the internal ones. In current wise thinking, community benefit organizations should first determine what kind of better world it is trying to create. In describing that better world, the board members and others involved in strategic planning will find themselves identifying values the want to see in the ideal world they will work to build.

The existing values that matter will come up if the board engages in the community in its planning, but might be missed if the board plans on its own without stakeholder input. In the course of community engagement, people will want to raise ethical issues and express their views. Facilitators should design for such opportunities and help everyone listen through that lens. The same is true for staff sessions held in preparation for the planning retreat. And in most organizations, staff or a cross-section of staff participate directly in the main planning session(s), so front-line knowledge is available in the room.

The only way to create a community with the values you want to see is to model it. You can't expect people to believe in your vision if you are acting in ways that oppose it. We are judged on our behaviour and our perceived intent, not our words. For example, if your vision involves a world with open knowledge sharing, but you keep everything valuable behind paid members-only logins, you won't make enough progress towards that part of the vision.

Why Involve Staff if the Board is Responsible?
In one organization where I was facilitating strategic planning, I posted the official Values Statement on a screen, taken directly from the web site. The staff members stared at it in horror and several said they would quit if these values were actually imposed. The board had done a Values Statement on its own some years earlier, and never discussed it with staff; staff had never followed the web site links to the Statement. The board was out of touch with the culture of the organization and how some words had shifted in meaning. Luckily, we had that opportunity to start over, this time together, and develop a Values Statement that made sense. Just because a board has the authority to do something doesn't mean they should use that authority without first informing themselves.

How can a Board learn more?
Here are a number of ideas:

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1. A board can listen to itself. Hear board discussions through an ethical values lens. Are people talking about fairness? Wise use of funds to serve the mission? Respect for employees? Inclusiveness of clientele? Have one director pull those ideas together and try to compile what matters, and then have a good dialogue about whether the right values are being considered in board decisions.

2. The Executive Director can be asked to ensure all staff meetings in some time period include a discussion of what factors are taken into account in decision-making. It's important to remember that non-management staff makes the most frequent decisions, but the senior management team should go through this exercise too. Often, the dialogue will need to start by identifying common decision types, such as:
   - Whether a potential new client will be given an appointment and how fast
   - What procurement criteria are used when costs are approximately equal
   - What affects employee performance reviews or compensation other than sheer output or other quantitative measures
   - What happens when work-life balance commitments collide with peak demand for services or a need for expanded service hours
   - What should be communicated re expectations of privacy of personal data on organizational computers

   Obviously, not all issues are going to be discussed at once! Each group could choose a couple that frequently caused ethical dilemmas. An organization can learn a lot through such discussions, including things it may not have wanted to hear but needed to hear.

   For example, in one organization I worked with, intake staff had been completely ignoring the intake criteria and valuing only personal and family connections to the professional staff. No one without such connections had any chance of being served. Management simply hadn't known. The ED acted very quickly to restore ethical decision-making to the intake function once the deviation came to light.

3. Community engagement activities such as focus groups, town halls and surveys can include questions designed to elicit the values the community wants from the organization. Sometimes the engagement work can also draw out how those desired values compare to the values the organization is perceived as practicing. For example, one organization that took great pride in being LGBT-friendly discovered it was seen as quite unwelcoming to transgendered people.

Using the Research
With this information, the board will be much more able to articulate the top aspirational values that make sense for the organization, and explain what they mean with a sentence or two about each value in the Values Statement.

A list of words or short phrases is not a Values Statement; it is a stage in developing one. People do not have a common understanding of what is meant by words like Diversity or Fairness on their own, and dictionary definitions are of little use compared to definitions customized to the organization's purpose.

Since the Values derive directly from the Vision, and refer to both the external and internal environments, the Values Statement is the logical bridge between Vision and Mission and I would place the statements in that order at the start of the strategic plan.

After the Values Statement is developed, or reviewed and refined in later years, apply it in the development of the Mission, Strategic Priorities, Success Measures and the rest of the planning.

Continuing the Values Conversation
Here are some ways to continue the Values Statement conversation:
1. Take a draft Values Statement out for discussion. Does it make sense? How would it be applied? Would it create new values conflicts and if so how might the Statement be revised or the conflicts resolved? What's missing?

2. Continue the dialogue. All board and staff meetings should regularly have case discussions focussed on ethical decision-making. Use recent problematic situations as a springboard to help people make better decisions in future, or be more confident that they have made good ones. Take turns developing realistic hypothetical situations to discuss, especially if when proposed or imposed changes may create new ethical dilemmas. In all cases, discuss how to model the values.

3. Change policies and practices that do not align with the Values Statement, including recruitment and promotion criteria if applicable, and explain why.

Live the Values
Once the board approves a Values Statement, make it a living document. Post it wherever meetings take place and explicitly refer to it while participating in or supporting decision-making. Quote it when communicating and explaining key decisions. Build it into all decision-making processes. Practice using it so you can apply the values quickly in crisis situations.

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