



Illustration images courtesy of John Pearson

BRING CLARITY TO DYSFUNCTIONAL BOARDS

THREE HATS

by John Pearson



It was Saturday morning of the overnight board retreat at a Minnesota camp and time for a coffee break. I was feeling good.

The PowerPoint worked. The executive director had inspired the full board to attend, and they were friendly to this out-of-state camping leader.

Energized with caffeine, we resumed the board enrichment sessions until I noticed an empty chair.

I paused, "Should we wait for Hank?"

Silence. Then muffled chuckles filled the room.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

No one offered to snitch on Hank, so I resumed my driver-with-too-much-content-mode road show until a noisy power saw in the next building interrupted my monologue.

More laughter. *Not muffled.* ▶

“Either you tell me what’s so funny, or I’m packing up the PowerPoint!” I demanded with phony sternness.

Finally, the board chair intervened. “John, really we do appreciate all of this board stuff. But Hank is our buildings and grounds committee chair—and it’s his job to get that cabin remodeled before summer. He told me he’d prefer completing his construction work today rather than wasting his time—I mean—investing his time in this board training session. I’m sure you understand.”

Yikes! That was a punch in the gut. Fortunately, before that emotion spilled out of my mouth, the Lord gave me a gentle nudge that was paradigm-changing. In that moment in Minnesota, I had a profound epiphany.

These God-honoring men and women had recruited Hank onto the camp board and the buildings and grounds committee with righteous motives, but for all the wrong reasons. Sure, he owned a power saw and his own construction company—but for Hank,

sitting in a boring board meeting was a major irritant. (Actually, as a construction guy, he used a few other words.)

Hank’s heart resonated with Eric Liddell, the Scottish runner in the 1924 Olympics, whose character in the movie *Chariots of Fire* said, “I believe God made me for a purpose, but He also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.” Hank’s joy meter ramped up when he mixed sawdust with service.

So that morning, we talked about Hank and board service and joy—at

THE GOVERNANCE HAT

► This one should be worn only in board meetings. The first step in balancing board roles is to clearly address what *governance* is and what it is not. So to be crystal clear: When Hank and other board members serve in volunteer roles—sawing, painting, marketing, emceeing, fundraising, serving, etc.—that is *not* governance.

BoardSource®, one of the leading organizations worldwide focused on board effectiveness, lists 10 basic governance responsibilities of nonprofit boards. They include: determining the mission, selecting the chief executive, ensuring effective planning, protecting assets and six other responsibilities (see “The 10 Essentials”).

In addition, Christ-centered board members will define these roles and responsibilities with additional insight especially as they spiritually discern God’s direction for their ministries. In the *ECFA Governance Toolbox Series No. 2: Balancing Board Roles* (a 12-minute DVD and viewing guide expands on the three hats), David L. McKenna says these are five distinctives of Christ-centered boards:

1. Common Christian Faith
2. Statement of Christian Faith
3. Christian Worldview
4. Maturing Fellowship
5. Accountability to God as Stewards.

Acknowledging that God is the owner, McKenna adds, “The board member’s actions, plans and policies are ultimately responsible for reflecting God’s will for the organization.”

As you review your governance documents, are the roles and responsibilities—the job description—of your board members crystal clear? Do they address the Governance Hat distinctives of stewarding a Christ-centered organization?



The ECFA toolbox includes seven self-assessment questions related to the Board Hat to address with your board, including:

Agree/Disagree: “We invite spiritually discerning and governance-savvy people to consider board service—but we don’t propose marriage on the first date!”

that fork-in-the-road board retreat. We talked about balancing board roles by defining the three board hats: the Governance Hat, the Volunteer Hat and the Participant Hat.

This insight was birthed that weekend: If you need a board member, recruit a board member. If you need a volunteer, recruit a volunteer.

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management and a champion of nonprofit organizations, said, “There is one thing all boards have in

common. They do not function.”

You may chuckle at Drucker’s tongue-in-cheek wisdom, but was he describing your board? By understanding these three hats—three distinct board roles—you will eliminate confusion and dysfunction for your current board. And when interviewing prospective board members, you can clearly articulate these core principles so new board members will avoid bringing their own delightful dysfunctions into your boardroom. ▼

THE VOLUNTEER HAT

► The best boards carefully delineate the Volunteer Hat from the Governance Hat by affirming these two principles:

1. Only the board can govern, while many can volunteer. Bruce Bugbee, author of *What You Do Best in the Body of Christ*, asks, “Why are you doing what others can do, when you are leaving undone what only you can do?”

Board members are directly accountable to God for the ministry. To spiritually discern God’s direction takes time. Only the board can set direction, establish and revise policies, select and support the CEO, and monitor and measure results. That takes time.

So with God’s leading, boards must recruit competent men and women for board service—especially those who have passion for good governance. And good governance takes time and often leaves little or no time for other volunteer roles.

2. Volunteering is optional. But volunteer service must be passion-based and aligned with a volunteer’s spiritual gifts and strengths.

At the end of every board meeting, the camp’s executive director might say, “Just a reminder that we need 50 key volunteers this year. If you have the passion, spiritual gifting and strengths to tackle a volunteer project, then let’s talk. Of course, your volunteer role is separate from your governance role—and every board member need *not* be a volunteer. But if you do volunteer, please remove your Governance Hat when wearing your Volunteer Hat.” ►

The ECFA toolbox lists 10 self-assessment questions for the Volunteer Hat, including:

Agree/Disagree: At least annually, we review our board’s committee structure to ensure that our committees are focused on governance work, not on staff or volunteer work.”



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THE PARTICIPANT HAT

► The Participant Hat addresses the organization's realistic expectations regarding board member attendance at ministry events. For example, new board members should know—up front—if hosting a table of 10 at the annual fundraising dinner is a required Participant Hat event. Glossing over their lack of advance planning, some executive directors and staff members often default to clever guilt tactics to prod board members into showing up. That's inappropriate and unfair—and hardly God-honoring.

Instead, effective boards leverage a “Board Member Annual Affirmation Statement,” a document signed annually by both new and current members that spells out the specifics for all three hats. This annual affirmation also adds rich meaning to the spiritual calling of board service and inspires high commitment.

As you inspire your board members to honor God in their stewardship of the camp's ministry, remind them often—wear just one hat at a time! ●

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A nine-question pop quiz in the ECFA toolbox asks “What hat are you wearing when...?”

- “All in favor say ‘aye’.”
- “The staff needs some accounting help to close the year-end books.”
- “Our day of prayer is on the 30th. All board members are expected to attend.”

REMINDE THEM OFTEN—
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blog for ECFA at www.ecfagovernance.blogspot.com.

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EXTRA INFO

RESOURCES FOR YOUR BOARD

- *ECFA Governance Toolbox Series No. 1, 2 and 3 (Recruiting Board Members, The 3 Hats, and Conflicts of Interest)*—www.ecfa.org/ToolboxSeries.aspx
- *Board Blog: Governance of Christ-Centered Organizations*—www.ecfagovernance.blogspot.com
- BoardSource: materials, magazines and membership for boards—www.boardsource.org
- “The Board Bucket” chapter in *Mastering the Management Buckets: 20 Critical Competencies for Leading Your Business or Nonprofit* by John Pearson—www.managementbuckets.com
- John Pearson's Board Bucket webpage—www.managementbuckets.com/board-bucket
- John Pearson's review of four books: “How Many Board Members Does It Take to Change a Light Bulb?”—www.urgentink.typepad.com/my_weblog/2014/11/serving-as-a-board-member-4-books.html