

The Decision Guide for Nonprofit Boards

Lisa Dahmus

Decision Publishing (Oct 25, 2012)

Softcover \$24.95 (106pp)

978-0-9854024-0-2

A board of directors that governs a nonprofit organization makes decisions that can affect whether or not that organization is successful in carrying out its mission. In fact, as Lisa Dahmus writes, “Poor decision making can cripple or even ruin an organization.” That’s why Dahmus wrote this highly useful and instructive guide inspired by her own experience as a change management consultant working with nonprofit boards.

Dahmus identifies and analyzes eight specific issues that she says impact many nonprofit boards: clarifying roles, operating proactively, identifying and securing the required expertise, collecting and analyzing data, cultivating a fully engaged board, defining and executing action items, facilitating meetings effectively, and improving continuously. The third issue, for example, concerns the fact that “boards sometimes make decisions they are not qualified to make.” Dahmus explains that oftentimes boards don’t even recognize that they lack a certain expertise needed to make a decision. She offers a handy form that board members can use when making major decisions—something she calls an expertise audit—and shows a specific example of how it can be applied.

In short chapters, Dahmus outlines each issue, indicates how best to address it, and includes some sort of tool to help the reader resolve the issue. She adds a reflection section at the end of each chapter, where she lists several provocative questions for the reader to consider. Following the eight issues, the author includes some tips for implementing the ideas in the text, additional resources for decision making, and a bibliography. Particularly helpful is the appendix where Dahmus reprints blank copies of all of the forms and charts referenced in earlier chapters. This makes it possible for the reader to adapt any of the tools in the book for immediate use.

This is an easy-to-read, uncomplicated guide presented with a simplicity that belies its considerable value. Dahmus could have easily expanded this volume into a textbook-sized work, but instead she has stripped it down to the basics. As such, any nonprofit board member will be able to consume the information quickly and benefit immediately from the author’s counsel. While there may well be more than eight major issues facing nonprofit boards, the ones chosen by Dahmus are compelling and seem likely to apply to the majority of boards.

Used correctly, *The Decision Guide for Nonprofit Boards* should help both experienced and novice board members improve their ability to work together to solve problems.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (May 16, 2013)

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