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BOARD MEMBERS AS BRAND AMBASSADORS

A discussion about the role of Board Members as Brand Ambassadors.

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Abstract

The changing landscape in the not for profit sector in Australia, and in particular Western Australia has prompted discussion on the concept of Board members as brand ambassadors. Not for profit organisations are changing rapidly, and in many ways dramatically. Their Boards face a future that looks nothing like the past. Markets, funding models and the structure of these organisations are at the forefront of conversations within the sector. Not for profits are reassessing their position within the market, what role they play and what the future holds.

An opportunity presents to consider doing things differently and the role of Board members as part of this process. This publication explores the role the Board plays in communications, how Board members can be effectively engaged as brand ambassadors and how they can expand their duties to include networking, relationship building and the media.

It highlights findings from existing literatures which vary in style as some were prescriptive and others descriptive of Board members' roles beyond governance. The eBook also incorporates opinions from past and present Board members who have extensive knowledge in the not for profit sector in Western Australia, and who were interviewed using carefully drafted questions as a guide. Their opinions either corroborated or contradicted existing literatures written predominantly by non-Australian writers. There were diverse views amongst those interviewed in regards to how they perceived their roles as brand ambassadors and duties relating to communications.

The findings suggest a requirement for improved awareness and education within organisational Boards in order to ensure Board members understand their roles in communications including

networking, relationship building, fundraising and/or media as well as how they can be effectively engaged as brand ambassadors. It appears the cumulative consensus from the interviews and existing literature is that Boards should challenge themselves and embrace roles outside the scope of governance.

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Understanding the Role of the Board

As a legal requirement, all not for profit organisations have a Board or management committee to oversee the business of the organisation. The Board or management committee have the traditional responsibilities of maintaining and safeguarding their organisation's mandate, values and objectives.

Given that not for profit organisations serve different community needs, their Boards and Board responsibilities can differ greatly; so too can the views and expectations of not for profit Board members, who are predominantly volunteers.

Boards are an extremely valuable asset to their organisations. Board members have a crucial role in directing the course of their organisation as well as providing guidance through active participation, strategic planning, finance, fundraising, marketing, and media.

A high performing Board understands change is inevitable and not for profit Boards need to embrace pending change and consider altering the way they work in order to ensure their organisation is ready to meet the potential challenges ahead. Broadly speaking, this may involve:

- Forward thinking - spending more time looking at the world outside the organisation to understand what the organisation needs to do to remain relevant and achieve its mission.
- Creating a platform for engagement – building the organisation's capacity and ability to effectively engage with funders and stakeholders in an increasingly connected world.

The “new world” may require not for profit organisations to be more open, transparent and collaborative, with a greater focus to effectively engage, connect and respond at many levels. Possibly, none more so than at senior levels of the organisation, including the Board.

If we accept that these responsibilities will become more important in the “new world” it is likely that many not for profit Boards will play an increased role in communication on behalf of the organisation and will be required to become active “brand ambassadors” adding not only value in governance but also seen as positive spokespeople, opinion leaders and community influencers who will assist in promoting the organisation and attracting more and varied funding sources.

Any function that the Board is required to undertake on behalf of the organisation should be clearly defined. This is arguably more important when it comes to Board members roles which might include communication and acting as brand ambassadors.

A high performing not for profit Board in the “new world” will not only provide the necessary governance structures but also sell the vision of its organisation to raise money, improve resources, and create strategic networks and partnerships.

Considering the Role of the Board in Communication

Boards can add significant value to the organisation in the areas of influence as well as raise the profile of the organisation by adding communication roles to the traditional portfolios, roles and responsibilities of Board directors. It could be argued that any effective Board should identify the most suitable ways of communicating with stakeholders and make sure that responsibility for managing communications with each group is clear. Without these guidelines and parameters there comes an increased risk to the “damage” of an organisation's brand. This view was confirmed by one of our contributors Chris Hall, current CEO of MercyCare.

In today's highly connected world there is evidence to suggest that communications are broadcast at a much more rapid rate requiring careful consideration when tasked with the responsibility of an organisation's reputation and brand. In some instances specific roles on Boards have been identified as key communication roles while others have taken a generalist view. One of our contributors suggested that not all Board members have the skills to market and promote. Do all Board members need to be up skilled in this area? Another experienced Board member communicated that the application process for a Board, they were on, included questions about the role of a brand ambassador and what skills and abilities Board applicants could contribute. Whilst recruiting for technical knowledge they also seek people with good interpersonal skills and capacity to act as a brand ambassador.

Dr Sue van Leeuwen suggested that the role of a Board member in stakeholder management in the not for profit sector is much stronger than in the for profit sector. As a former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) she recalled that she wanted to make it easy for her Board members as brand ambassadors to communicate the same message. She described creating a short document that was updated every few months that detailed key messages from the organisation for Board members to use that related to current issues and strategy.

Considering What Makes a Good Brand Ambassador

A brand ambassador is a marketing term for a person employed by an organisation or company to promote its products or services within the activity known as branding. The brand ambassador is meant to embody the corporate identity in appearance, demeanour, values and ethics.
The key element of brand ambassadors lies in their ability to use promotional strategies that will strengthen the customer-product/ service relationship and influence a large audience to buy and consume more. Predominantly, a brand ambassador is known as a positive spokesperson appointed as an internal or external agent to boost product/service sales and create brand awareness.

The term “brand ambassador” has expanded to include professional figures, testimonials and brand advocates. As a not for profit organisation there may be a number of sources that can be used as brand ambassadors or advocates such as the Board.

It has been identified that a crucial step to take is to recognise the potential value of these brand ambassadors to a not for profit organisation and to train them according to the organisation’s needs, standards and goals. Brand ambassadors are likely to communicate to the world about a brand, so the potential in equipping Board members in becoming brand ambassadors could be infinite.

The literature indicates that a brand ambassador’s efforts could help raise an organisation’s online profile and help the fundraising bottom line. This can be achieved in a number of ways for instance brand ambassadors might attend meetings where they might speak on the organisation’s behalf.

It has been discussed that without the proper training, know-how and monitoring, a brand ambassador could potentially become a liability, not an asset.

Our contributors identified some key learnings that have assisted them to be good brand ambassadors. These include:

- A knowledge and understanding of the organisation and its strategic direction;
- Identifying opportunities to promote and raise the profile of the organisation and relevant issues with the relevant audience;
- Identification of key messages and confidently communicating these in appropriate settings; and
- Excellent relationship management and communication skills.

Effectively Engaging the Board

Research suggests that Board members will play a more active role in the communication of an organisation. The key elements to prepare Board members for these roles have been identified as:

- Understand the issues that the brand will address and how this may be evolving. Board members should be required to study the external landscape and this should be built into the Board's agenda to reflect its importance. Organisations may invest in inviting external parties to provide insight into the changing landscape.
- Clear roles and responsibilities should be documented and adhered to on the protocols of communication.
- Appoint an owner of communication and marketing and promotional activities or strategies. Often this owner maybe the organisation's CEO.
- Provide Board members with any plans for promotional or communication strategies.
- Put words into the mouths of Board members that can strengthen the effectiveness of certain strategies.

- Be specific as to how much, who, what, when and where.

When Board members are provided with clear roles, responsibilities and expectations the effectiveness of their roles as communicators and brand ambassadors will increase.

Chris Hall identified that it is critical for the development of strategy to invest in educating the Board on the current and emerging issues that the organisation is seeking to address. Chris considered it important to give the group opportunity to better understand by inviting other experts from outside the organisation to present and openly discuss emerging issues.

Les Ozsdolay's experience is that good Board members are ones that are engaged. He commented that "members that live and breathe the business" can be more effective due to their connection.

Some of our experts reflected that they had prepared some dot points for Board members who identified key stakeholders and key messages. This provided an opportunity for a consistent message to be communicated from Board members in the public arena. For newer Board members, one contributor reflected that "new Board members need to know this information and have key messages to be able to deliver information at opportunity".

What value can members, as key communicators and brand ambassadors deliver to not for profit organisations?

Boards should be able to convey the key messages to the community in order to promote the organisation's brand. To successfully transform Boards into ambassadors, Board members

should be provided the relevant tools needed to forward the organisation's brand. This includes Board members being informed of the achievements and success stories of the organisation.

With effective communication and brand advocacy, stewardship or ambassador activities an organisation can strengthen their networks, fundraising activities, media profile and advocacy campaigns. These can further be strengthened through Board members' role in these endeavours.

It has been suggested that Board members should have soft networking skills in their scope at all times. There may be opportunities that present to raise the profile and awareness of issues. Positive and strong relationships are essential in the not for profit sector and have been helpful when issues or challenges arise. A tip from one of our experts was to build relationships before you need them. Justine Colyer suggested that, the role of brand ambassador was an underutilised area for Board members and there are many opportunities to promote an organisation as a Board member in our daily activities.

Justine recalled an example where a Board member played an exceptional role as a brand ambassador. This person was chairperson of a peak body and CEO of another. She identified both positions being key brand ambassador roles. She reflected that this person was excellent as he promoted the brand within existing and potential members by being approachable, in touch with the sector and what the organisation he represents can do for others. This person was also recognised as being a "force in advocating with politicians at that level, having a confidence in promoting what is being done and being open about what they do not know, but then finding out".

Michael McNulty communicated that increasing connectivity in the marketplace is important for Board members. He reflected that directors on Boards bring a lot of value and Board members should be used strategically according to their skills set and talents. He indicated that Board members should be able to talk about the organisation, reference the organisation where possible and build awareness with people who would otherwise not be aware.

Fundraising

Fundraising plays an important role in assisting the organisation to have suitable resources to achieve its objectives. Board members may have skills in this area. These skills or activities could include:

- Mentoring or coaching key organisational staff in the areas of promotion, marketing or fundraising;
- Organising a fund-raising event;
- Hosting a fundraiser;
- Approaching key sponsors and making connections on a personal level;
- Assisting the CEO or the person responsible in the organisation for funding activities to identify possible grants or sponsorship opportunities; and
- Partnering with government bodies, other not for profit organisations, charities and corporations for subsequent support from them.

Les Ozsdolay suggested that Board members' could reach out to their networks and contacts to increase fundraising efforts however it was important to consider not over drawing on these contacts and that it was important to recognize contributors in these fundraising activities.

There were differing views from our experts on the role of Board members in fundraising. Some expressed that this was a specific skill set and also depended on the amount of time that Board members had to contribute outside of their key skill set. One reflected that it was not the

Board's role to fundraise. Another commented that the Board's role depended on the strategy and size of the organisation. All contributors reflected that the views and roles of Board members in fundraising differ between Boards.

Advocacy

As advocates, the Board aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions.

Examples could include:

- Seeking opportunities to influence key decision makers;
- Hosting events;
- Fostering government relations; and
- Lobbying politicians and briefing government officials on key issues facing the organisation and those it represents or serves.

Individual Board members may be in a position to advocate for the interests of the greater community, in which the organisation exists, with the aim of influencing future decisions and strategies.

One of our contributors was on a Board in a sector that was poorly funded by government. They spoke about how they used their understanding of funding models when they had a chance engagement with a politician who was seeking views on this issue. They reflected that they happened to be in the right place at the right time and there was an opportunity to raise the issue. "I had an opportunity to connect them to the issue and to give facts about the issue". This informed Board member

indicated that they had the key messages to be able to deliver information when the opportunity arose.

The contributor affirmed that some activities of a brand ambassador may not have benefits at a strategic level that are tangible straight away, the outcome may be a meeting, funding or long term impact, that positively benefits the organisation or issue being presented.

Media

According to existing literatures on this topic Board members can be used as the media spokespeople for their organisations. Some writings suggest that a Board member's role in respect to the media will be to give interviews on pertinent issues or to write editorials or articles supporting or opposing an issue that affects the organisation.

However, there are varying views about Board members being used as media spokespersons for their organisations. Some of our experts identified that the CEO and Chairperson should be media trained. Others indicated that this was a specific role and in some organisations there is someone employed to undertake these activities, depending on the size of the organisation.

It was considered that in some instances Board members may be representing a foundation and the media role may be somewhat different to that of a usual organisation, so in some instances Board members may be more inclined to take on this role.

Conclusion

At a time where the landscape in the not for profit sector in Australia, and in particular Western Australia is changing in unprecedented ways it is a good time to consider the role of the Board and how it can better service the organisations they serve to achieve their missions and objectives.

Our research along with contribution from industry leaders has established that it is unlikely that Board members will be asked to contribute only by way of the traditional governance roles but rather take some more active roles in the organisation that promote the mission and objectives of their organisations through key communication activities as well as performing as brand ambassadors.

The “new world” may require not for profit organisations to be more open, transparent and collaborative, with a greater focus to effectively engage, connect and respond at many levels. Possibly, none more so than at senior levels of the organisation, including the Board.

Whilst this discussion has explored the Board members’ roles in communication and as active brand ambassadors along with the traditional governance roles they perform, it really has looked to challenge if the traditional roles Board members have performed in the not for profit sectors are sufficient to meet the demands of the new world.

We strongly believe that all not for profit Boards and management committees should be reviewing their roles and responsibilities and in fact that they will require a far more diverse range of skill sets not just limited to communication and the role of brand ambassadors to meet the new world challenges. What else does your Board need?

Thanks to our Contributors

Michael McNulty

Senior partner of Deloitte with over 20 years' of professional experience. He is the Office Managing Partner of Deloitte Western Australia and leads the Perth Consulting Practice. He has more than 20 years' experience across a broad range of industries and focuses primarily on mining and oil and gas. Michael provides services to many of the largest capital projects being undertaken in the Australian resources industry. He specialises in large-scale transformation and business improvement projects and has led major technology change programs.

Dr Sue van Leeuwen

Professional director, consultant and community leader. She has over 23 years' experience on not for profit Boards, government Boards and in senior executive roles. Sue has contributed at a strategic level to reform and innovation across Western Australia. She has her own consulting and leadership development business and consults in the areas of the management of change, reform, productivity, innovation, strategy, governance and leadership development. Most recently Sue was the CEO of Leadership Western Australia. Sue has an MBA and DBA. Her doctorate in business administration was undertaken in the area of leadership and innovation in the public sector.

Justine Colyer

20 years' experience in strategic planning and project management working in Europe and Australia in the private, public and not for profit sectors. She qualified with a BA Hons but has since undertaken a variety of additional professional studies and participated in WA's premier leadership programs. She has worked pro bono for over a decade to support the rights of marginalised people and is now very excited to be heading up one of State's leading not-for-profit organisations, RISE.

Les Ozsdolay

Currently the Vice Chair of Southcare Inc, Les has vast experience from his senior management career in the Commonwealth Public Service followed by 8 years as a Human Resource Consultant. Retiring in 2013, Les holds current positions including Secretary and past President of the Rotary Club of Como and Board Chair, Carson St Independent Public School, where he also supports activities at the school.

Chris Hall

Chris holds the position of Chief Executive Officer of MercyCare having been appointed in November 2010. Chris has held senior management and corporate governance positions in excess of twenty-five years in the Australian not-for-profit sector and local government industry at national, state and local levels. He has worked in the community services, health, mental health, disability and aged care sectors. Chris is a well-known supporter of the not-for-profit sector and well-recognised advocate and driver for social justice and for changes that benefit the community. He has served on numerous advisory and consultative bodies and committees to federal, state and local governments and on the Boards of various not-for-profit organisations. Among his current appointments, he is Co-Chair of Community Employers WA and a member of the State Training Board of WA, WA Partnership Forum and the WA Advisory Council for the Centre for Social Impact. Chris has tertiary qualifications in business management, social work and the arts and is a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors, Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management and 2009 Churchill Fellow.

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