

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION^{Review}

Editor's Note
Building Better Boards
By Eric Nee

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Building Better Boards

According to our reader surveys, nearly half of you reading this article sit on the board of directors of a for-profit or nonprofit organization; a role that carries a great deal of responsibility and influence. In concert with senior leadership, you help set the mission and strategy for the organization and ensure that it, and in particular its senior leadership, stays on track to achieve those goals.

Much has been written about how to create a more effective board of directors. These articles often look at the subject from a technical perspective, examining issues such as how long board members should serve, what kinds of committees should be created, and what the legal responsibilities of board members are.

We recently published an article that falls into this category, titled “Leading Boards in a Virtual World.” This is a subject of immediate concern for all those organizations that are now having to operate

virtually rather than in person. So, unsurprisingly, it is currently one of the most popular articles on our website.

These types of articles are important, but they don’t get at some of the larger issues that impact boards and the organizations they serve, such as the personal dynamics and culture that exist on the board and between the board and other important stakeholders, such as senior leadership, staff, and partners.

We published another article recently that does examine these topics, titled “The Four Principles of Purpose-Driven Board Leadership,” authored by Anne Wallestad, the president and CEO of BoardSource. It too is one of our most popular articles now.

I am happy to say that the cover story in this Summer 2021 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, titled “Decolonize Your Board,” adds to our growing body of articles about boards. The author, Natalie A. Walrond, uses the lens of “colonization” to look at board culture. Some may wonder what

colonization and decolonization has to do with a board; about this Walrond writes, “This article advocates for a vision of board service that actively disrupts oppressive mindsets and behaviors, using the concepts of *colonization* and *liberation* to improve board culture so that the nonprofits they serve can achieve their missions.”

So what does this mean in practice? “On colonized boards, members may ignore or devalue the expertise, knowledge, and guidance of the leadership team and/or attempt to influence action that contradicts the nonprofit’s mission,” writes Walrond. “They may advocate for their own positions without listening to and learning from their board colleagues or their leadership team. They may talk to funders about their own vision or strategy for the nonprofit rather than the way the leadership team frames the work—a covert way of usurping the CEO’s leadership.

“A decolonized board, by contrast, is founded on values of mutual respect, honesty, integrity, and transparency in communication between the nonprofit’s board and leadership. Both the board and leadership center the nonprofit’s mission in every conversation and balance outcomes of the work with the well-being of the team, the relationships with stakeholders, and the sustainability of the nonprofit.”

I encourage you to take the time to read this important article. —ERIC NEE

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