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Board Café is the electronic newsletter exclusively for members of nonprofit boards of directors. Short enough to read over a cup of coffee, Board Café offers a menu of ideas, information, opinion, news, and resources to help board members give and get the most out of board service. Each issue will bring you a cornucopia of "Little Ideas," as well as one "Big Idea" you can use in your board work.

## Evaluating Your Nonprofit

by Board Cafe (4/13/1999)

Nonprofit board members often have a hard time judging how well the agency is functioning. First, board members usually have only a limited time each month to spend on their volunteer board commitments. Second, board members are often unfamiliar with the intricacies of their agencies services, and/or elements of nonprofit management. Finally, board members often receive most of their information from the agency's executive director when in many ways the best judges of the agency's performance are the clients and community served. As Aristotle commented long ago, "The guest is a better judge of the feast than the cook."

As you probably guessed from the name, a 360 Degree Evaluation defines a circular process. In a 360 Degree Evaluation, the board seeks feedback from those who stand around the outside of the circle (as well as inside it): clients, the community, volunteers, donors, funders, and staff. The following examples suggest strategies for gathering input from a variety of constituents and sources:

### 1. From Staff:

Consider asking staff, as well as board members, to complete an Executive Director's Annual Assessment and/or a staff "climate survey" to learn more about their perspective of the agency's strengths and weaknesses. These responses should be given directly to the board president. Staff and board comments can either be submitted anonymously, although people could be encouraged to sign their names so follow-up questions could be addressed to the right individual. In order to respect confidentiality, any report that comes from these evaluations would not attribute a specific comment to any one individual. A summary of the staff and board's feedback would be shared with the executive director and the few board members who are delegated responsibility for the ED's evaluation. Board officers or a small committee of the board should meet with staff to respond to concerns and recommendations.

### 2. From Foundation, Corporate, and Government Funders:

Board members can conduct a series of telephone interviews with foundation and government program officers. For example, they can ask for comments on the quality of written proposals, quantity and quality of interaction with the agency, the agency's reputation in the community, and suggested areas for improvement or change. (Bonus: funders will almost always welcome such calls from board members and they'll be impressed that the organization's volunteer leadership is committed to getting feedback.)

### 3. From Donors and Volunteers:

Staff and/or board members can conduct telephone interviews with major donors and key

volunteers, asking for feedback on how well the agency involves and informs them. Donors and volunteers should also be asked to share their perceptions about the agency's effectiveness.

From Clients and Patrons:

Consider holding one or two focus groups with clients and patrons, facilitated by an experienced focus group facilitator, during which clients can give feedback on current services and unmet needs. A more extensive client survey can involve a written questionnaire, a telephone survey, or in-person interviews. An extensive survey may be undertaken as part of a strategic planning process, or such customer-service information may be collected routinely through follow-up contact.

5. From Independent Management Evaluators:

In addition to an annual audit by a certified public accountant, the board can contract with a consultant to conduct a "management audit" of the organization. Professional program evaluators assess human service programs both to find ways that the programs can be improved and to determine the outcomes of the agency's services and the impact on clients and the community.

Whatever method your board chooses, getting direct feedback on the performance and reputation of your organization will give you the independent knowledge you need to fulfill the board's responsibilities to ensure accountability to the community.

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