

PATHWAY HOMES

Board Retreat Overview

Oct 5, 2015

Background

Volunteer and executive leadership at Pathway Homes was planning to conduct a board retreat in early October. The prior strategic plan was nearing completion, the agency had undergone significant growth, and a number of individuals had recently joined the board. A retreat offered a number of opportunities including: providing an update on the agency, beginning to address the future strategic direction/plan, reviewing and assessing board recruitment and cultivation best practices, and enabling board members to become more familiar with each other. Leadership determined that an outside objective facilitator/trainer would add value and help with the design, development, and structure of the retreat. After a review of options, Lewis Flax was retained to serve as the retreat facilitator.

Board Member Interviews: Gain Insights

In order to gain an understanding of the perspectives, interests, and goals of the board, Lewis Flax conducted phone interviews with six current board members. These interviews provided Lewis with insights on the dynamics of the organization's culture, board customs and practices, and specific topics that deserved attention at the board retreat.

Interview Feedback: Key Points

- Board members overwhelmingly expressed a strong degree of faith and confidence in the capabilities of executive leadership. Based on past performance, a strong track record of growth, and a recognized commitment to the mission of the agency – the board members unanimously conveyed a strong confidence in leadership.
- Because of this trust in leadership, the board provides staff considerable flexibility in developing the strategic direction/plan for the agency. As a result, staff prepares the strategic plan and the board provides strategic guidance and poses questions to address potential risks.
- The interviewees stated that while they were familiar with each other through board meetings and committee work, they did not maintain strong relationships with their peers. A few board members mentioned that it would be helpful if a stronger bond or camaraderie were established with their fellow board members. Some suggested social events might be beneficial, while others thought that outside activities were not necessary; yet all agreed that getting to know each other on a more personal level would be productive.
- The board members conveyed that the board had become more sophisticated and advanced. At the same time, the majority expressed opinions that the board could advance in two specific areas –
 - Culture of philanthropy – While the board members are providing contributions, and serving as ambassadors, they agreed that a more disciplined, structured, and clearly communicated fundraising strategy would be beneficial.
 - Board recruitment and cultivation – The board has been involved in bringing on new board members, yet a more detailed and thorough process should help improve the overall effectiveness of the board.

Retreat Structure

Based on interview feedback, a meeting with executive leadership, and conversations with Sylisa Lambert-Woodard, the retreat schedule was developed to:

- Provide an overview on the current status of the agency.
- Offer an update on the strategic plan and begin to address steps for developing the next plan.
- Cover concepts related to the cultivation and recruitment of prospective board members (and the corresponding impact on fundraising).
- Obtain thoughts and gain consensus on an important issue that the board should address collectively.

In conducting the retreat, key factors included engagement and involvement of all board members, interactive exercises conducted throughout the day with the goal of arriving at tangible outcomes and specific next steps.

Retreat Overview

Please find below a brief summary of the key areas covered during the retreat:

Introductions

We opened the retreat with each board member selecting a colleague that they did not know very well. They spent time interviewing each other – and learning why they initially became involved with the agency, their interests/hobbies, and travel experiences. The introductions allowed each participant to become more familiar with another board member. Each board member then introduced their peer to the other participants.

Current Status of the Agency

Sylisa Lambert-Woodard provided a thorough overview of the agency. She focused on key service offerings, the strategic plan and how it was nearing completion, and provided information on comparable agencies that offer similar services. A number of thought provoking questions were raised by board members including –

- Current agency service offerings
- The future direction of the agency
- Strategic plan update and next steps
- Benchmarking the agency against other similar organizations
- Reimbursement status and requirements
- Financing options and Virginia state government entities that provide support

The time was well spent as it brought the board members up to date on the strategic plan, potential next steps, and provided a baseline understanding of differences/similarities between Pathway Homes and other organizations providing similar services.

We next played a game (a version of Jeopardy – with questions related to Pathway Homes) to reinforce key points. Areas covered included funding options related to housing, state agencies that offer support/financing, advocacy issues of importance, and fundraising results. Overall, this was an effective way to engage everyone and enable board members to become more familiar with the agency, reinforce key concepts, and establish camaraderie among the participants.

Board Member Recruitment and Cultivation

An issue that was raised by both board members and executive leadership involved the recruitment and cultivation of prospective board members. Many of those interviewed were interested in discussing best practices to identify and recruit dedicated and committed individuals to join the board.

The board was asked to compare board service to other situations that they encounter in their daily lives. Potential options included trying out for a sports team, joining a musical group, or some other experience/expectations prior to joining a specific group, team, or organization. Each board member was asked to come up with an example in their life (or an experience with their children) and think through the process/effort to become a member/participant of the group. Dan Gray shared his experience joining the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers and Jennifer McKenzie explained the steps she needed to take to become a member of the color guard. While very different types of organizations, they both conveyed similar processes including –

- Completing a detailed application
- Providing references that vouch for the candidate’s experience, capabilities, and skills
- An extensive interview process with a committee of individuals active in the organization
- Demonstrating skills through tests, drills, and try-outs
- Extensive practice to ensure a competent skill level

The next step was to evaluate these experiences and begin to think about how this could be applied to prospective candidates for the Pathway Board. Many ideas were suggested including volunteering on-site, active involvement in committee work, participating in fundraising events, and providing assistance associated with relevant advocacy issues. Key points agreed upon included the following:

- The most important quality in assessing potential board candidates is a strong dedication and commitment to the mission of the agency.
- The more thorough and detailed the process, the more potential board members would value the experience and view acceptance in the group/board as a special privilege.
- This type of approach should be implemented for future candidates prior to joining the Pathway Board
- The understanding that in establishing this type of approach, a number of individuals will not be invited to join the board and this will improve the quality, commitment, and effectiveness of those that serve on the board.
- Once board members are selected, the on-boarding process should involve specific steps to ensure that they are acclimated to the customs, expectations, and duties of serving as a board member.

Next Steps

The last phase of the retreat focused on issues/topics for the board to address collectively. Each participant thought of an idea/project for the board to consider. The board members presented their ideas to the group – and the board members voted on which project they thought would be of greatest benefit. The project selected was raised by Jennifer Judelsohn and involved improving the board’s knowledge. At future board meetings, board members, in conjunction with staff, would share insights/education on a specific subject.

In concluding, each board member was asked to think about the development of the next strategic plan. More specifically, each board member was requested to review potential stakeholders involved in the development of the strategic plan and draft questions to ask of the specific stakeholder group.