

Why Won't They Engage?

A different way to think about board participation

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We help nonprofit leaders turn learning into action.

1. Reframe the question

1. ONCE UPON A TIME... A group of people came together because they cared about a common purpose. 	2. EVERY DAY... They tried to move that purpose forward through their board service. 	3. BUT ONE DAY... They realized that simply asking people to participate wasn't enough. 	4. BECAUSE OF THAT...
5. BECAUSE OF THAT...	6. BECAUSE OF THAT...	7. UNTIL FINALLY...	8. AND EVER SINCE THEN...

What would you do next? _____

What do you want board members to do more consistently? _____

How might you reframe the question: Why won't my board engage? _____

2. Understand the system

Strong boards create the conditions that make meaningful participation possible.



 Why are we here?	 How do we organize participation?	 How do we work together?	 How people experience participation?	 What are we trying to accomplish together?
Purpose gives meaning to the board's work. It helps the board decide what matters most.	Structure creates the opportunities people have to participate. It includes roles, meetings, information, decisions, and opportunities to contribute.	People naturally develop patterns as they work together. Identity: Who are we? Trust: Can we rely on one another? Belonging: Do I feel included? Norms: How do we work together? Influence: Whose voices matter? Support: Do we help one another succeed?	People are more likely to engage when they experience: Competence: <i>I can do this.</i> Agency: <i>My actions make a difference.</i> Connection: <i>I belong here and this work matters to me.</i>	Engagement isn't the goal. Some form of collective action is. Governance includes setting direction, making decisions, providing oversight, ensuring resources, advocating for the mission, and strengthening organizational sustainability.

1. Where would you put this?

Board members don't help with key tasks (i.e. raise money).

Meetings are dominated by two people.

Members receive (and don't read) a lengthy board packet.

A new member says, "I don't know enough to contribute."

	Structure	Group	Individual

2. What's the connection...

How does structure influence group dynamics?

How does group dynamics influence how individuals experience participation?

3. Where would you start in your own organization? (What can you influence?)

3. Diagnose your board

Performance = Potential – Interference.

How does this formula play out in your organization?

Routine Check-Up

HOW TO USE		RATE EACH STATEMENT		FOCUS AREA		
1. Complete individually. 2. Compare and discuss as a board. 3. Identify top opportunities. 4. Choose one or two experiments. 5. Revisit and reflect.		CONSISTENTLY: This is a strength. SOMETIMES: There's room to improve. RARELY: This is getting in the way.		What area board work would you like to focus on? Date:		
			CONSISTENTLY	SOMETIMES	RARELY	
 PURPOSE Why are we here?	We have a shared understanding of why our organization exists.	☐	☐	☐		
	We understand our role in the larger ecosystem in which we work.	☐	☐	☐		
	We connect board discussions to our mission and purpose.	☐	☐	☐		
	We revisit our purpose when making important decisions.	☐	☐	☐		
 STRUCTURE How do we organize participation?	Roles and expectations are clear.	☐	☐	☐		
	Meetings make good use of everyone's time.	☐	☐	☐		
	Information is timely, clear, and useful.	☐	☐	☐		
	Everyone has meaningful opportunities to contribute.	☐	☐	☐		
	Decision-making is clear and transparent.	☐	☐	☐		
 GROUP DYNAMICS How do we work together?	We have a shared understanding of how we work together as a board.	☐	☐	☐		
	People ask honest questions and different perspectives are welcomed and respected.	☐	☐	☐		
	Participation is shared—not dominated by a few voices.	☐	☐	☐		
	People work through disagreement constructively.	☐	☐	☐		
	Board members feel included, valued, and supported.	☐	☐	☐		
 INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE How do people experience participation?	Board members feel prepared with the knowledge and skills to contribute.	☐	☐	☐		
	Board members believe their contributions make a difference.	☐	☐	☐		
	Board members feel connected to the mission.	☐	☐	☐		
	Board members feel connected to one another and the community they serve.	☐	☐	☐		

Diagnose a Problem

What is one thing you are observing with your board?	What are possible explanations?
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4. Design for engagement

How do we intentionally design environments where people can do their best work together?

What are you noticing?	Ideas to consider	Which one will you test? Who? What? When? Where?
The board isn't clear about what it's trying to accomplish together.	Clarify governance responsibilities • Define success • Focus agendas on board work • Distinguish governance from management • Identify the board's highest-value work	
Purpose isn't clear.	Revisit purpose • Connect decisions to mission • Share impact stories • Discuss community needs • Celebrate progress	
Structure gets in the way.	Clarify roles • Improve meetings • Simplify information • Improve onboarding • Create meaningful opportunities to contribute	
Group dynamics make participation difficult.	Establish norms • Build trust • Invite every voice • Encourage healthy disagreement • Build relationships	
People don't feel capable.	Orientation • Coaching • Examples • Practice • Board buddy	
People don't believe their contributions matter.	Share ownership • Explain how input influenced decisions • Invite questions • Give meaningful responsibilities	
People don't feel connected.	Mission moments • Relationships • Recognition • Shared experiences • Celebrate milestones	

Make It Stick

Where will this fit into your existing work? _____

What obstacles should you plan for? _____

How will you gather feedback and adjust? _____

Who else should help lead this effort? _____

Let's finish our story....

