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theBoardbuilder

Inspiring and informing better Boards

Exclusively for members of not-for-profit Committees and Boards.

In Good Health

St Vincent's wins not-for-profit reporting award

Page 19

Sharing the Load

EastWeb getting young people on board

Page 28

Directors without Borders

Do we really have to have another meeting?

Page 39

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Sharing the Load

Getting young people on board

EastWeb, a grantmaker linked to the Melbourne Community Foundation, has an advisory board made up exclusively of people between the ages of 19 and 29. Once board members reach the age of 30, a sunset clause sees them leave the board and make way for someone younger. EastWeb board member KATHERINE MONSON shares some of the strategies and philosophies that help the organisation attract and retain young board members, as well as replace them when the time comes.

Board Builder: How is the fund's advisory board set up? How many people are on it and what are their responsibilities?

Katherine Monson: The advisory board consists of between six and 10 young people. At the moment it has seven members aged between 19 and 29 from a range of cultural, professional and educational backgrounds.

The board is an active board rather than a sitting board. Each board member holds or shares a portfolio of responsibilities – such as community relations, governance, events or fundraising – which they manage alongside other board duties of liaising with grant applicants and making decisions regarding the activities of the fund.

The board meets monthly and the typical expectation is that board members are able to contribute an average of two hours a week to their board duties.

Board Builder: How did you come about the idea for a sunset clause for board members once they reach the age of 30?

Katherine Monson: The idea for the sunset clause at age 30 emerged because the initial board was conscious of the general lack of involvement of young people in philanthropy.

In particular, we'd noticed that whilst opportunities to become involved in philanthropy might be available within family trusts and funds, there were very few opportunities for people who had not grown up in philanthropic circles to become involved in philanthropy.

We wanted the EastWeb advisory board to function as a community development project in and of itself; just as much as the projects we fund do. We wanted to make sure it was building capacity in the philanthropic sector; but also in the community sector.

We believe we can do this by building a pool of knowledge about the inner workings of philanthropy, to enhance the quality and value of interactions between people working in the community sector and people working in the philanthropic sector; and by empowering community members ►

Who is EastWeb?

EastWeb (www.eastweb.org.au) is a subfund of the Melbourne Community Foundation.

The EastWeb Fund was handed over to young people for management in 2004.

At this time it was also decided that the size of the fund meant that it could best serve the community via small grants, and that these would be most meaningful when directed to small-scale, grass-roots community development projects in refugee, asylum-seeker and Indigenous communities.

EastWeb focuses on projects which have the potential to build community capacity in the areas of health, education, employment and cultural heritage.

Grants are usually in the range of \$1500-2000, with EastWeb's annual giving amounting to around \$15,000. However, its work in sourcing for applicants other funding, in-kind and additional support opportunities takes this figure to closer to \$40,000.

Sharing the Load

Getting young people on board

themselves to access philanthropy.

Board Builder: How do you combat the turnover of people (and the drain of knowledge) that occurs when people on the advisory board move on? Is there an induction process which helps you retain and pass on the knowledge as board members come and go?

Katherine Monson: The EastWeb Board is relatively young for a board – we've only been sitting for four years – so procedures for succession planning and knowledge retention are continuously considered and revised.

However, because of the ages of board members, and because of the lifestyles of young people – changing work and study commitments, travel plans, changes in family shape – turnover of people is frequent and succession planning and knowledge retention are constantly on our agenda.

New recruits to the EastWeb advisory board are invited to join a portfolio of their preference which will meet their own learning goals and personal needs from board membership, or match any existing skills they may want to utilise.

In this portfolio, they will typically initially “shadow” and partner in the work of a more experienced board member before beginning to become more self-directed and autonomous.

The time frame for this procedure varies from individual to individual. New board members experience

support and mentoring closely in their early days on the board as they come to know its processes and procedures. More experienced board members have the opportunity to share their knowledge and begin succession-planning.

We make sure we have time for regular social catch-ups, so as to ensure board members get opportunities to talk both formally and informally about their experience of being on the board, and to discuss what kinds of supports might be valuable to them.

Whilst EastWeb is focused on knowledge management and retention, there is also a very strong focus on being dynamic, flexible, responsive, and driven by the members of the advisory board at any given time.

All policies and procedures exist in permanent “draft” form, to ensure revision can occur at any given time.

We're also currently focused on recording the history of some of the decisions which have shaped the board, so that future decisions made by new board members can acknowledge this history rather than reinventing the wheel.

Board Builder: What about ongoing support? How do you quickly get new board members up to speed; especially if they have little or no knowledge of boards or of the grantmaking industry?

Katherine Monson: This is a challenge

for both continuing and ongoing board members, which is magnified by the different backgrounds of board members. For many board members, English is a second (or third, or fourth) language.

However, this challenge is also a benefit as it holds the board continually accountable to the values of true participation, collaboration, partnership and community building which first shaped its governance procedures.

The need to revisit internal policies and at times review them; to refresh literature, evidence base and stakeholder opinions of best practice; and to review relationships with other organisations, are all fabulous ways for us to continue to be accountable to our principles.

In addition, the board does not subscribe to a belief that people come on board with little or no knowledge base – not only do we believe that all recruits come with an immense body of lived experience which is invaluable to the decision-making processes of the board, but we also believe that “outside-eyes” are a priceless asset in ensuring that philanthropy becomes more meaningful and accessible to the community at large, rather than its relatively few direct participants.

Ongoing collaboration with other funds, combined with formal and informal mentoring of board members from other participants in ►

Sharing the Load

Getting young people on board

philanthropy, ensure two-way flow of information – towards the board from other parts of the philanthropic sector; and to other parts of the philanthropic sector from philanthropy-naïve EastWeb board members who may have innovative new ideas about ways of doing things, or questions about why things aren't done differently.

Board Builder: If there are challenges presented by the constant board turnover, are there benefits as well? If so, what are they, and do they balance the challenges?

Katherine Monson: We benefit greatly from the constant flow-through of board membership. Fresh ideas, dynamism and enthusiasm are always entering the board to challenge existing board members' ideas about the best ways of doing things.

The focus on recruiting board members from stakeholder communities also ensures that procedures and decisions are drawn back to the best interests of stakeholder communities, as identified by community members themselves.

Board Builder: How do you actively go out and snare the recruits you want? And in doing so, how do you ensure a balance of people with different perspectives on the board?

Katherine Monson: The mix of people involved on the board has been very important so far in the EastWeb journey, particularly in terms of understanding the communities we endeavor to work with.

We are lucky enough to have a number of patrons and other mentors who have always actively supported recruitment and retention to the EastWeb advisory board.

Our recruitment process has ranged from sending out emails to stakeholders seeking interested individuals, to assertively recruiting specific people we've encountered through our paid employment or through grantmaking activities.

The chair meets informally with potential recruits, to discuss the meaning and expectations of board membership, as well as to see how board membership might meet the personal goals of the potential board member.

Potential recruits are then invited to participate in a meeting before making a decision about membership.

Board Builder: Finally, have you any suggestions for groups which involve young people on boards, or which face a constant turnover of board members?

Katherine Monson: We believe it's important to acknowledge that those characteristics of young people often seen as weaknesses or deficits – lack of knowledge of the sector; lack of knowledge of board procedures or governance protocol – can very easily be turned into strengths for the ongoing development of any board.

It's important to recognise that young people come to board membership with their own agenda for skill

or professional development, or knowledge acquisition to take back to their community, and we believe that it's best for all concerned if boards can endeavor to support this development through flexibility and targeted mentoring.

It's also really important to remember that young people change studies, career direction, jobs, relationships and living situations more frequently than your other board members!

This means that they may require different kinds of support to participate in decision-making, but also, that their membership may be of a briefer period than is traditional.

This isn't necessarily a weakness either. With one young person moving on, your board will have room for a new young person to share their expertise, and for you to share yours. ■