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what's your board's leadership style?

It all starts at the top. Your board, like any group of people working collectively to the same end, cannot be strong without strong leadership.

Now let's see how the Asking Styles impact leadership at your organization.

board chair

Serving as a board chair requires a good deal of time and talent. An effective board chair can devote five to ten hours a week

or more. Being a good leader means keeping your eye on the prize, delegating appropriately, creating unity, and much more. It requires a wide range of skills.

Every leader has strengths and weaknesses. No one has it all. The best leaders are self-aware and surround themselves with people whose skill sets complement theirs. Your board chair's Asking Style will give you a sense of their strengths and challenges:

Rainmaker

Role

- Keeps everyone's eye on the prize

Strengths

- Keeps everything moving toward your goals
- Pushes hard to succeed (themselves and everyone else)
- Approaches things objectively and factually

Challenges

- Not big on process and might not allow everyone to have their say
- Can forget to use their bedside manner

Go-Getter

Role

- Keeps the big picture alive

Strengths

- Has vision and gets everyone to buy into it
- Believes passionately
- Is very inclusive and encourages lots of process

Challenges

- Can be unstructured and not clear about where things are headed
- Has lots of ideas but doesn't always prioritize

Kindred Spirit

Role

- Remembers the people being impacted

Strengths

- Always keeps the beneficiaries front and center
- Makes sure all board members are heard and feel respected and appreciated
- Acknowledges everyone's efforts

Challenges

- Hard to discipline others and keep everyone in line
- Takes things personally and acts out of emotion

Mission Controller

Role

- Makes sure things are doable...and get done

Strengths

- Very planful and methodical
- Creates a sense of structure and forethought
- Listens to everyone's point of view

Challenges

- Can lose sight of the bigger picture
- Might not assert leadership when necessary

Years ago I had a board chair who was a Mission Controller. He was superb at keeping things moving ahead. Board meetings were organized and started and ended on time. Reports were submitted and reviewed. He did a great job of following Robert's Rules of Order. Yet he often got into the weeds too soon and, therefore, tended to give in to other board members' tendencies to bring the conversation down to an inappropriate level of detail.

Luckily, the former board chair, an active and formidable pres-

ence, counteracted that with his input at the table. He took big, calculated risks in life (do you hear Rainmaker?), knew the organization had to do so to have the greatest impact, and was the one to rally the troops through his confidence. He was also the one to say “Maybe that should be left to the committee” or “How about if the staff takes a crack at that.”

EXERCISE: Your Board Chair’s Asking Style

- Make an educated guess about your board chair’s Asking Style based on the descriptions above.
- Ask yourself how their Style impacts their leadership and your working relationship.
- List three ways you might act going forward with this new understanding.

Depending on one’s Style, each board chair will benefit from different leadership partners. As in most things, we often subconsciously surround ourselves with people similar to ourselves, yet what we often need is those whose talents are different but complementary. For example, if your board chair is a Kindred Spirit and the rest of your executive committee is as well, this will create a dynamic where everything is driven by the personal and it could mean important, objective decisions are hard to make. If everyone is a Go-Getter, you’ll have lots of great ideas but might lack the framework to move them forward.

Now imagine the dynamic if you have a range of Styles on your executive committee. Imagine having various committee members who together make sure the board is strategically and systematically moving toward a vision while always keeping participants’ needs in mind.

board committees

These descriptions hold true for your committee chairs and committee dynamics as well. Are you a committee chair and, if so, can you see where your Style impacts your leadership? What are the Styles of all your committee chairs and what can you infer from this? How about the committees on which you serve—what are the Style profiles of those committees?

I’m often asked whether one should assign committee leadership and membership based on Asking Styles. In both cases I think it should be a factor, but only after considering other factors such as leadership ability, subject expertise, and personal interest.

Example #1

Finance Committee Grappling With Fiscal Issues

Let’s say your organization has had financial management issues—the books are a mess, you got a bad audit, expenses need to be trimmed, etc. This calls for detail people who will take the time to understand what’s going on, come up with a plan to fix it, and stay on top of it while it’s being addressed. Sounds like an extra helping of Mission Controllers is needed, though the other Styles would still provide balance (i.e., Go-Getters offering up outside-the-box solutions).

Example #2

Governance Committee Working to Enlarge the Board

Perhaps your board has dwindled due to natural attrition or a change in mission direction, and you need to quickly bring on new members to keep the board vibrant. This calls for outgoing people who will relish talking to people they may not know well, if at all, and getting to know them quickly. This might be an opportunity

for Rainmakers and Go-Getters, the two extroverted Styles. Rainmakers will be more strategic in their work while Go-Getters will be best at just jumping right in and getting it done.

Example #3

Executive Committee Wanting to Improve Board Camaraderie

Is your board disjointed, with different camps or new members who don't know each other? Or perhaps you're a national or regional board that only meets in person twice a year and has to figure out other ways to develop board camaraderie. Or maybe our current virtual world is creating distance challenges. Kindred Spirits are always thinking of how to make others feel good and will enthusiastically dig into this project. They'll want to know what their fellow board members need to feel part of the team. You might add some Mission Controllers to implement the interactions once the Kindred Spirits have devised them.

Two final notes on this. First, getting board members to serve in leadership roles is not easy, and you might not have a lot of options or the ability to choose based on Asking Styles (or much of anything!). Often there is only one person who will take on a role, and that person might not even have the experience or talent necessary, in which case you work with what you have, understanding the strengths and limitations their Asking Style might bring.

Second, going through this analysis is not about scientifically placing board members in leadership roles, but rather understanding board dynamics and encouraging and supporting the best work possible. In some cases, it will give you “aha” moments, where you finally understand why something isn't working right, and you can make an adjustment. And it certainly can impact how you look at

recruitment, which we'll discuss in Chapter 10. Some corporations use these types of personality “tests” when hiring, training, and promoting employees, and if you're with a large nonprofit you might be doing similar analyses. However, for most nonprofits the Asking Styles are a less formal but extremely helpful tool.

More than 30 years ago, I was brought on to the Chicago Dance Coalition board of directors as the treasurer because there wasn't an existing board member who they felt could do the job. A very unusual and risky move, but they decided my position heading a dance company and my finance background were enough of a credential and they had no other good options. Needless to say, I relied on my Secondary Asking Style of Mission Controller to do the job.