Guide to Policy Making

Although setting policy is a primary board responsibility, in all but a few situations, staff in put into board decision-making is essential because successful implementation depends on involving the organization's key employees in the entire process.

Policies reflect an organization's values, ensure continuity of management and delineate parameters that serve as guidelines for action or decisions. They help build and sustain public trust and the reputation of the organization.

Policy making is a multi-step process:

Step 1: Define the Issue or Problem
The process of policy development begins with recognizing the need for written policy. Remember, the board is not alone in identifying policy needs. Staff, volunteers, donors, grantmakers, service organizations and government agencies are all sources of policy-related priorities.

Step 2: Research
Gather the necessary information on the issue. Helpful resources include the experience of other organizations, articles and books and state or federal laws and regulations. It may also be appropriate to involve a lawyer throughout the development and adoption process.

Sample policy language can streamline the process and is a good starting point. But it is never a good idea to simply insert your organization's name and present the document to the board for approval. The policy MUST be discussed and tailored to reflect your organization's culture, to conform to your other policies and to ensure that it is embraced by everyone involved in its implementation.

Step 3: Discuss and Debate at the Board Level
To set the stage for informed dialogue, consider assigning one board member to educate the board on the key issues to be addressed in the policy. A first step could be to examine your current practices in light of the contents of a model policy. Ask, "What changes should be made due to our special circumstances?" Encourage lively debate.

Step 4: Draft the Policy
After the board has reached consensus on policy content, the board's policy writer goes to work. This person must be able to write clearly, directly and succinctly. Pomposity, verbosity, jargon and "legalese" should be avoided.

Step 5: Read and Revise
Once in writing, the draft policy should be placed on the board's agenda. Be sure to distribute the draft in advance of the meeting. Again, begin with a presentation that summarizes the content. Then ask:
• Is the policy limited to one topic?
• Does it adequately cover the subject?
• Is it written in plain English? Is it brief and unambiguous?
• Does it support the organization's mission and goals?
• What editing is required so that anyone who must comply will easily understand the policy?
• Is it practical?
• Is it consistent with local, state and federal law?
• Is it sound business practice?
• Is it consistent with existing policies?
• Does it have the full support of the CEO and/or those who will be responsible for carrying out the policy?
Revise the policy based on the information gained from the questions, comments and suggestions obtained after the first reading.

Step 6: Adopt the Policy
Before the policy is adopted, be sure the board understands what has been revised. Discuss what steps need to be taken to ensure that the policy accomplishes its goal.

Step 7: Implementation
Policies should be centrally available. They should not be scattered about, discoverable only by scouring years of board meeting minutes. They should be disseminated to the staff and made available, on request, to the public and media. Above all, the policy — and the spirit of the policy — must be embraced and lived by everyone involved with its implementation or the policy will be meaningless.

Step 8: Policy Evaluation and Revision
Up-to-date policies are the only ones that work. They can become out of date, unclear or even contrary to the way in which the organization is operating. Policies should be reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they comply with applicable laws and the ethical guidelines established by professional and service organizations. The policy modification process is the same as the policy adoption process.