Civility - the act of showing regard for others

In 2007, Gulf Coast Community Foundation launched Because it Matters – an initiative to increase civility (and therefore social capital) in our community. The initiative took off, with over 50 organizations and 15,000 participants in the first four months. Soon, people began asking, what about civility in the boardroom?

How does civility relate to how a board works together? Board members need to be able to solve tough problems so that their organization can thrive. Burgess and Burgess (1997) noted that an inability to address issues is attributable to the destructive way in which issues are addressed: personal attacks, factual misstatements, misunderstandings, and win/lose situations. Thoughtful dialogue – include constructive conflict – requires the following:

- ✓ Create an atmosphere where board members are comfortable raising tough questions. One way to do that is to publicly recognize the value of critical thinking. Solving problems raised by tough questions increases your chances of success.

- ✓ Focus on the relative merits of problem-solving ideas so that you generate the best solutions for your organization. Use available facts – not rhetoric – to determine which solutions will work for your organization.

- ✓ Brainstorm ways to create a win-win rather than seeing issues as a win-lose. One organization was trying to determine where to cut their budget, with two groups disagreeing. After creative thinking, they were able to determine which of the two programs could more easily utilize volunteers, did so, and kept both running.

- ✓ Make an honest and continuing effort to understand other viewpoints, perspectives, values, and experiences. Have an agreed upon decision-making process to encourage thoughtful dialogue. Include fact-finding and brainstorming.

Because a board only has power as a group, we have put together this toolkit to help nonprofit boards work better together. The toolkit contains the 7 keys to boardroom

civility, boardroom civility best practices, and exercises to assist your board in its civility-building work.

Seven Keys to Boardroom Civility

1. **Respect others** – Honor other people and their opinions, especially in the midst of a disagreement.

2. **Listen** – Focus on others in order to better understand their points of view.

3. **Think positively** – Approach others assuming they are good, honest, and sensitive.

4. **Speak kindly** – Don't gossip and don't accept when others choose to do so.

5. **Accept others** – Foster openness and inclusion.

6. **Say thank you** – Feel good that someone felt like you were worth complimenting.

7. **Keep your cool** – Accept life's challenges with grace.

Best Practices

Limit outside the boardroom communication. The *Duty of Care* requires that the board participate in collective decision-making. The board only has power as a group, not as individual members. The *Duty of Loyalty* means that what happens in the boardroom stays in the boardroom. That means being cautious outside of the boardroom communication to ensure that it is only a tool for scheduling, coordinating, and sharing information – not for having substantive discussions. This includes parking lot meetings and email. While email, intranets, and chat boards are very efficient for sharing information, they cannot substitute for thoughtful dialogue about the issues facing a board.

Adopt a technology clause. In order to ensure that technology helps – not hinders – good dialogue, make sure that those participating remotely can actually participate. The following technology clause can be included in your bylaws: Any one or more directors may participate in a meeting of the Board of Directors by means of a conference telephone or similar telecommunications device, which allows all persons participating in the meeting to hear each other. Participation by telephone shall be equivalent to presence in person at the meeting for purposes of determining if a quorum is present.

Use meeting evaluations. Use meeting evaluations to ensure efficient and effective meetings. You can use a 1 (needs improvement) to 5 (we did spectacular today) scale. You may want to consider the following civilty-related items:

- All board members were prepared to discuss materials sent in advance.
- A diversity of opinions were expressed and issues were dealt with in a respectful manner.
- The chair guided the meeting effectively and members participated responsibly.
- All board members were present.
- We enjoyed being together.

Adopt a conflict of interest statement. A conflict of interest statement ensures the duty of loyalty. Adopting a conflict of interest statement signals that your board cares about good decision-making and not personal agendas. If you don't have one, adopt one. Check out BoardSource for examples and templates.

Create a decision-making policy. Consider adopting a decision-making policy that outlines how your board will value critical thinking, gather facts, and ensure that all board members participate in thoughtful discussion about the issues facing the board.

Sample Exercises

I. Pick three keys to civility in the boardroom that are most relevant for your organization, or, each board member can pick the three keys most relevant to them. These keys can then be put on the back of each board member's name tent.

II. With either the full board or a task force, **create a civility-oriented meeting evaluation** that addresses the unique aspects of that organization's culture and operations. You may want to begin by pulling together a few samples and having

board members discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each. Leave time, however, for brainstorming. Use the process to model civility and civil discourse.

III. Have the board discuss the following – if you were going to **give an award for civility** to a fellow board member, what would be the criteria?

IV. Find or create a fun **conflict-resolution role play** so that the board can practice resolving conflict. First present the four rules for resolving conflict (1. What are you really arguing about? 2. Stay on topic, 3. Ask questions; listen to the answers, and 4. Solve the problem) and then the situation:

Exercise: You are the board for an art museum that supports and shows only local, current artists who are racial and ethnic minorities. You firmly believe in your mission. A donor has just offered to pay for a huge reception and host a showing of paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, which are from the 17th century but had a profound impact on art development. This exhibit would be very different from anything you've ever done before and from what your supporters expect of the museum. What do you do?

Split the board into three groups. One group is told that they think this is a great idea, that they want to share the historic works, and that they LOVE a party. Emphasize that they feel really strongly that this is a great idea. One group is told that they hate this idea. They don't like big events and they think that the Dutch Masters don't have anything to do with their local artists, who are current and diverse. Emphasize that they feel really strongly that this is a bad idea. The third group is an observer that tracks how well they follow the rules. The first team to solve the problem (not persuade the other side) gets a prize. Some pretty creative solutions can result, but the most common is a small reception where the Dutch Master techniques and local artists' techniques are compared and/or workshops on Dutch Master techniques for local artists, etc.

V. With either the full board or a task force, **develop a decision-making policy** that addresses the civility points outlined in the beginning of the tool kit. Again, a few examples might help to get the group started.

Sources:
Hughes, Lakey & Bobowick, The Board Building Cycle, 2003
Burgess & Burgess, The Meaning of Civility, 1997