

You See Something Say Something

By Bob Harris, CAE

The incoming president announces her priorities. She shares her vision with the board, committees and staff, forecasting a successful leadership year.

What could go wrong?

The vision of the president was clear. Committees have been appointed and charged with advancing elements of the strategic plan.

Yet, sixty days into the term one of the committee vice chairs is upset. He disagrees with a committee decision and proceeds to advise everyone, “Our committee is a waste of time.”

The committee’s chairman ignores the negativity. Members of the committee tire of the comments and stop attending meetings. The committee has a meltdown, quorums are no longer possible, and the vice chair quits.

If only someone had told the elected president. She had no idea the committee was failing. It took six months for her to hear about the failure. Half way through her term it was too late to re-appoint the committee.

If the board had agreed that everyone serves on the same team, then somebody should have reported the dysfunction.

See something, say something

The phrase is the public awareness campaign of the Department of Homeland Security, encouraging people to tell authorities if they see suspicious activity.

The same concept can be applied to the leadership team. When something goes awry, the leaders should say something. The sooner a problem is identified the quicker it can be resolved. Ignoring the problem may sabotage a successful year.

Set ground rules

In addition to “say something,” agree upon leadership ground rules.

Timeliness – Meetings start and end on time, valuing the commitment of volunteers and staff. (At committee meetings, when a member arrives late, they should refrain



from voting until the next agenda item so as not to interrupt the flow of the discussion for those who arrived on time.)

Respect – New ideas and people will be respected, encouraged and appreciated.

Integrity – Every person will maintain the highest standards of integrity in carrying out their responsibilities.

Unity – Decisions of the board are final and all agree to speak as one voice.

Authority – No person will usurp the authority of officers or staff by appearing to speak or contract for the organization.

Accountability – Commitments made by volunteers and staff will be honored without the need for reminders or pleas for follow through.

Vision – Discussions should focus on the future to best serve stakeholders.

Innovation – Volunteer leaders should focus on solutions rather than only reporting problems.

Use a set of ground rules to improve organizational performance. By the leadership team agreeing to expectations success is more likely.

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.