



THE PULSE OF AN Organization

Judith Stockdale has been executive director of the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation since 1994. The foundation focuses on land conservation and artistic vitality in the Chicago region and the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Judith is a former board member of the Land Trust Alliance, and here she addresses the role of a strong board of directors to the health (and funding) of an organization.

Q: Why does the foundation fund land conservation work?

A: Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley were big conservationists. Throughout their lives they were interested in outdoor sports and this led them to an ethic for land. Land they owned in South Carolina and Illinois has been put under conservation easement, and they were, in fact, among some of the earliest easement donors in the U.S.

Q: What makes a strong board?

A: The board has to have a strong cohesion and a sense of itself as an entity, and has to understand collaboration well. It is useless to have a board of mavericks; the board needs to recognize that *thoughtful consensus is the ideal*.

A board that has been invested in the development of the strategy of the organization is very important. And the board must understand that staff [if applicable] are the executors of the work.

Micro-management by the board on a day-to-day basis is not helpful.

Term limits are crucial too. Even though it is hard to say goodbye to especially great board members, it is important to get new blood on the board, and for newcomers to receive a strong orientation to the group.

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Board members should slowly rotate among committees so no one gets pigeonholed into one role.

And board members should be willing to speak their beliefs and be passionate about the issues. The chair of the board should be someone who realizes that his or her role is to obtain all voices from the board. A chair who

talks all the time and totally runs the ship is not a good chair. On the other hand, one who sits and only listens is also not a good chair. There must be a diplomatic balance. And the chair should ensure that individual board members are getting what they need out of their service. If a board member doesn't show up to a meeting or two, then the chair should check in to see what's happening.

Q: Does the presence or absence of a strong board affect your funding decisions?

A: Absolutely! When an organization is new it often has an inexperienced board so we invest in helping that board get stronger. We also will be very up front in telling a group if its board has issues, such as relatives of the executive on the board, or other conflicts which are not healthy and not advised. If the situation doesn't change, we will put a group on notice, informing them that the foundation will not consider further proposals until a remedy is in place. We also believe it's not a good idea to have the executive be a voting member of the board, or the leader of the board. A