

**BOARDS THAT MAKE A  
DIFFERENCE –  
THE CARVER MODEL**

**A Review and Explanation of  
The Critical Roles of Boards**

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**Boards That Make A Difference**  
**John Carver**  
**Josey Bass Publisher, 1990**

Board members' role is to dream, debate,  
explore and define the dreams of the  
organization.

Instead, time is spent on:

- Trivial items
- Reading reams of documents
- Muddling in administration
- Staff that control the agenda more than the Board
- Rubber-stamping staff recommendations

“In my experience, **most** of what the majority of boards do either does not need to be done or is a waste of time when done by the Board.”

John Carver

## **NEW VISION FOR GOVERNING BOARDS**

- Project a vision
- Infuse an organization with mission
- Bid staff to be all they can be
- Have the Board grow in the process

Boards bear the ultimate accountability for organizational activity and accomplishments

## **WHAT GOES WRONG WITH BOARDS**

- Time on the trivial
- Short-term bias
- Reactive stance
- Reviewing, rehashing, redoing
- Leaky accountability
- Diffuse authority

## **INADEQUATE PRESCRIPTION FOR SUCCESS**

- More Board involvement
- Less Board involvement
- Board as watchdog
- Board as cheerleader
- Board as manager
- Board as planner
- Board as communicator

## **WHY THE PRESCRIPTIONS DISAPPOINT**

- Each one contains just enough truth to be on track
- Anecdotal success leads to spotty applicability
- Long meetings move to shorter ones
- Short meetings lead to longer ones
- Strong CEOs lead Board by their management style, biases, and priorities

## NEW VISION FOR GOVERNING BOARDS

- Primary responsibility is “moral ownership”
- Focus needs to be on stakeholders to whom the Board owes its primary allegiance – usually the community itself
- Governing boards would do better to think of themselves as a special kinds of management, **not** volunteers

## TOWARD A NEW GOVERNANCE

- “Cradle” vision
- Explicitly address fundamental values
- Force an external focus
- Enable an outcome-driven organizing system
- Separate large issues from small
- Force forward thinking
- Enable proactivity
- Facilitate diversity and unity
- Describe relationships to various constituencies
- Define a common basis for discipline
- Delineate the Board’s role in common topics
- Determine what information is needed
- Balance overcontrol and undercontrol
- Use Board time efficiently

“We need strong boards and we need strong executives as well; one of the key problems is that many boards are either too weak to accomplish anything or so strong they end up managing the organization.”

Robert Gale  
Former President of the  
Assn. of Governing Boards  
Of Universities and Colleges

1989

## SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FOR MRDD BOARDS

Boards are both administrators (funders) and providers (vendors)

Many Boards do not fully understand or appreciate the tenets of free choice of provider.

There is often a strategic question that never gets asked.

“As a county board, do we want to or need to be a provider?”

The answer determines whether the MRDD Board is provider of first resort or last resort.

The MRDD Board has two missions:

- One as a governing board
- One as a provider board

How Boards approach this can make all the difference.

