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## THEORIES TO UNDERSTAND BOARDS

Before executive directors can get to the point of applying appropriate theories to stimulate board activity, they need to understand the intent and meaning of different theories. Gaining such understanding might entail taking a refresher course or opening up some books to review the content discussed in graduate school or in a BSW degree program. The idea of assessing a situation using theoretical perspectives may feel unfamiliar. However, everyone who has already earned their MSW degree from a school accredited by the Council on Social Work Education has been oriented to some set of theories that help to explain behavior and that aid in the assessment and development of intervention strategies.

Writing about social work theories, Howe (2009, p. 2) informs us that “the theoretically informed social worker remains steady in the midst of confusion, curious about the unexplained, caring in the face

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of distress, and compassionate in the presence of need. Social work theories are therefore good things to have if you want your practice to be sensitive, intelligent and organized." All theories have their limitations and critics of a theory will always point out its limitations and its degree of usefulness. The fact that there are social workers who do not like certain theories and favor others points out that choosing a theory is not simply based on the relevance of the theory; it is also a matter of personal and professional orientation.

For instance, I observed a lively debate during a weekly case conference at an outpatient clinic: imagine presenting a case and explaining your intervention approach is going to be family therapy. You base this approach on your theoretical orientation that the parents' complaints about their sixteen-year-old adolescent son are part of an unhealthy triangulation that keeps the parents' relationship stable and focused on their child and not their marriage. Despite the soundness of the theory, a psychologist in the group says that your approach is misguided. He claims that the adolescent is likely depressed, attempting to individuate from his parents, and in need of individual interpersonal therapy. The psychiatrist says she would like to review the files and meet with the boy to place him on medication if he is clinically depressed. She suggests that the adolescent is struggling with his ego. Both practitioners have their own theoretical orientation on how to assess the adolescent's problems and determine the best course of intervention. Despite each practitioner's orientation, some researchers claim that theory selection and techniques used in therapy have no bearing on the outcome of treatment. Instead, the most important factor for success is the therapeutic relationship (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). Similarly, an important factor in assisting a board of directors in achieving success in their roles and responsibilities is establishing a trusting relationship between the executive director and board members.

Social workers may be more accustomed to the above case conference scenario, because it touches on theories that try to explain personality, family dynamics, behavior, and cognition. Theories designed

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to improve the practice of management and leadership may be less familiar to the social worker in the role of executive director. However, there are some theories that cross over between clinical applications and management and leadership applications, such as communication theory and human behavior theories, among others.

It is not as important to memorize a number of different theories as it is to know where and how to access different theories and use them as a tool to help inform our understanding of leadership and management. Access to different theories is available through the Internet, journal articles, and books. If the overall objective is for a social worker to be an effective executive director and help his or her human service organization's board of directors accomplish its governance functions, then the executive director (or social worker as a board member) must become familiar with board models of governance that are used to orchestrate action to achieve management and governance objectives.

A board model represents an analogue of a set of properties and functions used when operational. If we had familiarity with the actual practices it represents, we could identify the model in use or we could discuss it on a conceptual level. Models are useful for the executive director seeking guidance on how to most effectively work with a board of directors. Although related, a model and a theory are different. Whereas a model is a representation, a theory provides an explanation of the relatedness of the concepts. Since models are derived from theory, then familiarity with some helpful theories is where we need to begin.

For you as a social worker employed as the executive director (or serving as a member of the board) it would help to increase your personal and professional toolbox of theories that can help to deepen your understanding of board dynamics, relationship issues, and ideas for intervening to strengthen waning board relationships and to reinforce board stability and effectiveness.

What follows is an exploration of selected theories in the areas of leadership, personality, identity, social behavior, and communication.

## LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Beginning in the late 1940s, researchers at the Ohio State University conducted a series of research experiments aimed at understanding leadership behavior. They concluded there were two types of leader-managers. One type was relationship oriented and likely to find more satisfied and motivated employees who rated the leader very high. In contrast, the task oriented leader-manager, who focused more on the process of getting the work done, realized greater group productivity. The researchers concluded that the best leader-manager was a person who had the ability to focus on the needs of the employee while also setting work expectations.

This advice has applicability in working with boards of directors and can be compared with a widely used approach in social work, that is, the strengths perspective. The leader manager is expected to be able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of his or her supervisee and provide the supports in the work environment that will help the employee be successful. For the board member, the executive director should be in a similar position to examine the knowledge, skills, and abilities of board members and incorporate the board members' strengths and the environmental supports in their board role by suggesting tasks or committee assignments that would use the board members' capabilities to further the aims of the organization.

Rensis Likert, at the University of Michigan, was similarly interested in investigating management behavior patterns during the same period of the Ohio State research. Likert, too, wanted to determine what type or style of management and leadership behavior would produce the best outcomes. Likert discovered that the higher producing employees were supervised by individuals who focused on the human aspects of their employees and relied on effective work groups. In contrast, supervisors who pressured their employees had the least productive and least satisfied employees.

Likert's conclusions about stimulating productivity were similar to the results of the Hawthorne illumination studies of the 1920s and

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1930s. Among the research findings from experiments at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne Plant, Elton Mayo and his associates found that increased worker productivity was the result of being supervised by managers who took a human interest in their employees. Similarly, Likert's (1967) research findings indicated the importance of placing trust in employees and demonstrating respect for their knowledge and skills.

Likert discovered that it was only necessary to inform an experienced employee about the objectives that needed to be accomplished, and not dictate to that employee how to do the job. Higher levels of productivity resulted from this form of generalized guidance. Low production was more common when experienced employees were closely supervised and given specific directions on how to do their job.

Conceptually, Likert viewed management style differences on a continuum. System 1 is at one end, characterized as a highly structured, authoritarian style of management that is comparable to McGregor's Theory X. According to Theory X, individuals are not viewed in a positive light. They are considered to be apathetic and not interested in independent responsibility. At the polar end is System 4, which is similar to the assumptions found in McGregor's Theory Y, whereby managers believe in the talents and aspirations of their employees. When properly motivated, individuals can be creative and self-directed. Both McGregor's Theory Y and System 4 represent a management style based on trust, confidence, and mutual respect.

The research studies at the University of Michigan and Ohio State were part of a series of investigations over a period of two decades that sought to differentiate the behavior patterns of leaders and the effects on employee satisfaction and production. The leadership models and theories that were developed across several generations affirm that researchers can systematically observe and differentiate types of behaviors of individuals we call "leaders." Additionally, it is helpful to know that it is possible to observe and examine the impact that different leadership behaviors can have on individuals who are employed by human service organizations, whether they are paid staff or volunteers.

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By being able to recognize and sort out the types of concerns that exist among individuals, it is possible to create an intervention strategy that will improve attitudes and increase both staff and board member performance.

One theory that requires a flexible and knowledgeable leader-manager is Hersey and Blanchard's situational leadership theory. The idea of situational leadership is to closely match one's supervision style to the knowledge and skill level of each employee. In some ways, situational leadership is an outgrowth of Likert's ideas about the level of oversight a supervisor should provide when the employee does not require direction. This same insight should be used when working with a board of directors. The long-standing social work approach of starting "where the client is" fits for the board member. Not all board members have the same level of governing experiences and, therefore, will need tailored supports. This approach of providing supports is also board model specific. It is not a philosophy that would be encouraged by all board theorists (but it does fit for the Board Relationship Model). An effective executive director will have identified the strengths and interests of the board member. When a board member agrees to an assignment or voluntarily declares his or her interest in an assignment of their own making, the situational leadership approach of the executive director is applied to help mobilize the resources the board member may need. Assessing the board member's task will determine how much and what type of support the executive director will offer.

On one end of the situational leadership spectrum, you will find board members who have considerable resources available to them through their employment or from personal means, and who can use these resources without taxing the human service organization. On the other end are board members who want to take on tasks that are outside of their comfort zone and who do not have the materials, equipment, or personal supports of their workplace to draw from. To prevent failure in their tasks, the executive director will need to monitor and assess the board members' progress to determine the best way to use their strengths. When advising board members in areas outside of

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their skill base it is important to consider one's own attitudes about board members engaging in specific assignments. As a situational leader, it is critical to be supportive and not convey a condescending attitude.

Behavioral leadership theories suggest that individuals can become more adept at being leaders if they can be flexible in their leader style and demonstrate a caring response toward employees. This approach fits well with the eclectic approach that social workers can bring to their management positions and to the support of their boards of directors. A social worker's skill to analyze the needs of staff or volunteers is important for the purpose of demonstrating to those individuals that they matter to the overall direction of the human service organization. Some employees and board members prefer a more definitive understanding of the organization's direction and the role they play in it. Other employees and board members are content with simply receiving work or committee assignments with instructions so that they know exactly what to accomplish. Whether behavioral leadership theories are used to focus our understanding on the leader role of executive directors or board members, we should be mindful that we are also observing behaviors that are influenced by each individual's personality traits and motivational needs.

## PERSONALITY-BASED THEORY

It should be no surprise to social workers that people's personalities will have some bearing on the behaviors and attitudes they bring to their participation on the board of directors of a human service organization. Personality traits are so vital to understanding the behavior of individuals that it has become a popular subject in books, movies, and television programs where investigators develop personality profiles of criminals and forecast those criminals' next set of troubling behaviors. This upsurge of interest in personality has moved it from the scientific to more pop-psychology or commonplace applications. Examining how

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personality characteristics can affect the workplace is no longer the domain of organizational behavior specialists.

Personality typecasting has become a common activity within organizations. Many human resource departments have their new employees take one of several available questionnaires, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the LEAD, the Managerial Grid, and the Brain Map, among others, that classify people into personality types. These various personality classifying tools inform individuals what their predominate style or preferred patterns of interaction would be in the workplace.

With knowledge about one's own personality profile, in addition to knowing about the profiles of other employees, an executive director can purposefully alter his or her preferred style of interaction in order to maximize his or her relationships with staff. It may be a bit unorthodox to use personality profiles in the boardroom, but if it can enhance the peer-to-peer interaction among staff, why not use it with board members? When board members have an understanding of each other's personality types, they can learn to anticipate the behavior and emotional statements during a meeting. A benefit comes from understanding each board member's patterns or styles of interaction. Equipped with this knowledge, the executive director has an advantage of listening more intently to his or her board of directors. Likewise, board members can learn to communicate words and images to their board colleagues in a manner that will improve information sharing. Board members can also choose to overlook certain offensive response styles from other board members because they know that their colleague's behavior is more personality driven and not necessarily in response to the content or decisions made during the board meeting.

In reality, it is not very likely that an executive director or a board member would bring up the idea of having board members take a personality test. Absent the board of directors completing a work-style personality inventory, the executive director can still learn to observe the traits and styles of his or her board members and be reasonably accurate in applying similar personality descriptions and attributions.



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Determining board members' styles of personality can lead to understanding what type of intrinsic or extrinsic factors could motivate them. A favorable time to observe board members and their personality style differences and similarities would be before, during, and after board meetings.

There are many different classifications of personality that can be seen in other individuals' behaviors. In some cases, an individual board member might self-identify his or her personality style. For example, some individuals will gladly label themselves a "Type A" personality. An individual classified as Type A would usually exhibit a cluster of behaviors characterized by competitiveness, impatience, controlling, and having difficulty in avoiding stress due to their ambition and motivational drive for success. A more pathological style that we would not expect to be self-identified is a Machiavellian personality type. Machiavellianism is characterized by interpersonal manipulation to promote one's own goals and interests (Al Ain, Carré, Fantini-Hauwel, Baudouin, & Besche-Richard, 2013).

Social workers may be familiar with many different combinations of personality attributes that are either learned or innate. Personality traits influence whether a person is motivated to engage in activities and can be a factor in whether a board member will take on an assignment, engage in discussions, or even remain on the board. A popular model of human personality consists of five separate dimensions that underlie all personality types. The five dimensions are: Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Within each of these dimensions, an individual can fall anywhere on a continuum of high to low.

1. Agreeableness—an individual who is labeled as high on Agreeableness would tend to be more cooperative and trusting. If an individual is low on Agreeableness, the individual would be expected to be more focused on themselves and less interested in the work of others.

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2. Conscientiousness—an individual who is low on the continuum of Conscientiousness would not be as careful in their work performance. On the other end of the spectrum, a person high in Conscientiousness would be very organized and efficient.
3. Emotional Stability—an individual who falls on the high side of Emotional Stability would withstand stress better than a person who is lower on the continuum. Individuals who are lower on the scale of Emotional Stability may have self-esteem issues and not feel as secure in their work and abilities.
4. Extroversion—an individual who is low on the Extroversion continuum would be considered shy, less sociable, and quiet. On the other side of the continuum, a person considered high in Extroversion would be friendly, open, and relationship oriented.
5. Openness to Experience—an individual who is high in Openness to Experience would have an artistic edge to them and a creative imagination. Individuals lower on the scale of Openness to Experience would prefer more familiarity and would be less curious than their counterpart.

Social workers should be aware of one of the most influential motivational theories of the past seventy years, Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Its simplicity is what has made it so attractive. People have needs. Maslow suggested that there is a range of human needs and as a person's lower needs are met, the individual will attempt to fulfill their higher needs, consciously or unconsciously. The five needs are: physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and at the top of his hierarchy is self-actualization needs. While the relevance of Maslow's theory has been questioned throughout the years, including the order of the hierarchy, it has helped executive directors by

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providing a framework to consider the need profile of each board and staff member. A theory that helps an executive director not lose sight of the fact that board members also have human needs is instructive.

A lesser-known theory, but one that is based on empirical research, is McClelland's (1961) achievement motivation theory. Like many of the personality theories that can be used as a lens to examine the potent forces that drive human behavior in human service organizations, achievement motivation theory can be used for that purpose. It can also be used as a framework for viewing board behavior. This theory suggests that individuals with a high need for achievement differentiate themselves from other individuals. They are driven to excel and to personally succeed at their goals rather than take on a task simply for material rewards.

In addition to examining the Need for Achievement, McClelland and his associates also considered the implications on human behavior of an individual's Need for Power and Need for Affiliation. When applying all three needs (achievement, power and affiliation), the theoretical framework considers an individual's behaviors in an organization in the context of having either high or low needs or motives in each one of these need categories. The board member who has a high need for achievement may be a high achiever and entrepreneur, but does not necessarily have the social skills or inclination to be a supportive board member. A board member with a high need for power may be driven to control others and wants to be recognized as an influential and indispensable board member. A board member with a high need for affiliation would generally be characterized as people-oriented and a consensus builder.

Aside from examining the board member from the perspective of personality traits, it is also possible to gain insight from relational theory in social work (Saari, 2005) to understand the personality dynamics that a new board member experiences in adjusting to his or her new board role. When a new board member is confronted with their new board peers who have pre-established a cohesive group,

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the new board member is challenged to take on a new identity to fit into the group. How well the new board member is able to construct his or her new board identity is a function of his or her cognitive abilities and the supportive nature of the board members' interactions. The more reserved or aloof a board is to its new member, the harder the transformation the new member will have in becoming a recognizable member of that board of directors. If the board is welcoming, then the ability to self-identify will be smooth and the experience of their new membership will feel genuine. This transitional experience is similar to Social Work Professor Emerita Carolyn Saari's concept of "identity complexity" (although our application is not tied to a clinical intervention or observation) in which the personality is not stagnant but constantly being modified to fit within a person's environment (p. 9). Additionally, the challenges to adjust to a new board environment with a group of heretofore strangers have four basic elements of healthy identity complexity, as described by Saari:

(1) the ability to share meaning with others; (2) the ability to conceive of multiple meanings; (3) the ability to recognize choices for behavior; and (4) the ability to conceive of future possibilities, a conception that I like. This conception does not, however, include the ability to move with relative ease from one familiar environment to another, something I think is also necessary for psychosocial health, and the thing I have been referring to as the ability to "transcontext." Entirely new environments can be expected to involve difficulty since the person must first create new event representations to form a new picture of this world, but we expect that the healthy person will ordinarily be able to do this without major difficulty. (p. 11)

By understanding that a new board member will need to construct an identity to fit into their new environment, the executive director can be helpful to that new board member by preparing her or him with information applicable to the transition.

## **LEWIN'S FORCE FIELD ANALYSIS MODEL**

Kurt Lewin (1947) developed an organizational development theory that could be used as an analytical and planning tool for determining where the emphasis of a change effort should be directed. Influenced by the field of physics, Lewin's Force Field Analysis suggests that there are competing forces that influence the target of a change effort. The manager has major decision choices, either focusing efforts on leaving things in a state of equilibrium or status quo versus the option of introducing change efforts by increasing the driving forces that direct behavior away from the status quo. Driving forces tend to move in the direction of change. These forces can be fueled by positive energy that comes from recognition, productivity, or other achievements. A manager may also have to make decisions about responding to those forces that impede organizational change. Forces that impede change efforts are restraining forces and are considered to be negative. In the boardroom, they may be the result of an angry board chairperson, disagreement between board members, information withheld by the executive director, or board members trying to micromanage the operations of the human service organization.

At times, boards of directors can be in a state of equilibrium that is balanced between the driving and restraining forces. Depending on what the board chairperson and/or executive director or majority of the board wants to promote, a decision can be made that tips the balance to create a successful change effort. The changes could be in areas of policy, mission, vision, programs, fundraising events, or the composition of the board. If the balance is tipped, the executive director should assist the board in reestablishing equilibrium in order to reinforce and stabilize the changes.

## **THE THEORY OF DECISION-MAKING**

Executive directors and board members in human service organizations are frequently required to make decisions. After all, there would be no

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purpose in holding board meetings if board members were simply going to listen to reports and not be asked to make any governance decisions. Despite the vital necessity to make meaningful and effective decisions, there is evidence to suggest that human service boards and executive directors are not always at their best. Charles Glisson, a social worker and distinguished professor, raised the question as to why human service organizations have different climates and cultures. Glisson defines organizational climate as a psychological climate in which a worker will perceive the environment as either positively or negatively affecting them. When employees share similar perceptions of work it is considered organizational climate. Culture is considered the property of the norms, values, and beliefs of a social system and climate that reflect the individuals within the system. The differences between climate and culture were raised because Glisson wondered why effective organizations are not emulated in their culture and climate by other organizations.

Glisson answered his question by turning to the work of Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon, who recognized some shortcomings in the way that managers approach decision-making. According to Simon (1957), decision-makers are not as diligent in their decision-making as they could be, and they can be bounded by rational decisions, that is, not believing they need to research their options any further than the first reasonable decision that they think of. As it applies to executive directors and boards of directors, Simon would refer to this short-sighted decision-making approach as “satisficing,” which is to adopt the first reasonable decision that emerges rather than dig deeper to determine if other options would be better. Simon does state that the decisions address important issues although not the most important ones. Various demands placed on human service organizations may lead to satisfied decisions that do not lead to the best outcomes. Glisson (2009) states:

Although such strategies may well address concerns raised by boards of directors, funders, legislators, or public interest

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groups, these strategies do not address effectiveness or outcomes. This is to say that the factors contributing to the development of an organization's culture or climate (such as an emphasis on documenting process or decreasing costs) may be unrelated, or at times detrimental, to its effectiveness, while at the same time being central to its survival. (p. 128)

Decision-making is the process of solving problems and setting the human service organization on a course of action. Some decisions require involvement of the board of directors while others can be relegated to the executive director and his or her management team. The determination as to which group should take the lead on decision-making is specific to board models. A model such as the policy governance model would be clear that policy decisions are the responsibility of the board of directors, and decisions about the manner in which the staff decide to achieve the desired ends set by the board are left to the executive director (except if there are specific board policies that limit the executive director to specific implementation strategies). In other models, the authority to make a decision is determined by the level of strategy and whether it falls into the realm of management or governance.

An administrative model advanced by Richard Chait and Barbara Taylor (1989) was based on the earlier work of Richard M. Hodgetts and Max S. Wortman, Jr. (1975). It identifies six policy levels, as follows:

1. *Major policies.* Fundamental issues of mission or business definition, typically involving questions of institutional direction, values, priorities, and principles that guide other decisions.
2. *Secondary policies.* Questions of primary clientele, types of services, and delivery systems, which may focus on relationship of programs and departments to the overall mission. These issues often entail significant decisions about human, financial, and physical resources.

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3. *Functional policies.* Concerns of major functional operations, such as planning, budgeting, finance, marketing, and personnel.
4. *Minor policies.* Decisions that govern day-to-day practices. They may be important as a pet project of an individual or of a special interest group.
5. *Standard operating procedures.* Mechanisms and procedures to handle routine transactions and normal operations— matters of form, process, method, and application of other policies.
6. *Rules.* Regulations that guide or prescribe everyday conduct.

Taken together, these policy levels comprise the “policy structure” of an organization. For the most part, the board should devote little energy to lower level policies such as operating procedures and rules; such policies usually fall too far outside the board’s appropriate sphere of concern.

Specific to this model, the board determines which policies are administrative in nature and which are governing policies. Decisions on policy matters that are considered to be higher level should be made by the board of directors and lower level policies should be reserved for the executive director and his or her management staff.

### EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

Boards and executive directors do not typically look to the research literature to inform themselves of information that can be used in decision-making. By not examining the results from empirical work, the board and executive director may be relying on older and outdated information. This issue of remaining stuck on certain decision approaches is vast and not social work specific. A remedy is gaining



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some popularity across many of the social sciences, that is, “evidence-based practice (EBP)” (Mathews & Crawford, 2011). Whether the practice is clinical or in the boardroom, there is merit to examining how to use evidence-based management and governance as a paradigm for making decisions. The approach is a systematic process for gathering information, evaluating it, making decisions about it, and implementing those decisions. It is reminiscent of the scientific approaches to designing research studies, that is, formulating the questions, gathering evidence, assessing the information, describing the result and its application, and at some point returning to assess the validity of the approach.

Evidence-based practice is being included in this section of theories that can improve the management, governance, and leadership of the executive director and boards of directors because it promotes the principle of effective decision-making, which for boards can be a legal issue. Boards of directors operating within a nonprofit tax-exempt status are required to adhere to one of three legal provisions in corporate law. One of the applicable decisions is the Duty of Care. This provision requires board members to be informed before voting on any matter. The greater the possible impact the greater the responsibility the board has to ensure that they understand the implications of their vote and will make prudent decisions.

The evidence-based practice approach should be relatively unbound from all board models because it relies on information that has proven helpful and is not based solely on the preferences of different board theorists, executive directors, or board members. The cautions involved, however, include using the research findings with a firm understanding of the context in which the research was conducted. The findings from research should not be the sole determiner for boards in guiding decisions or for executive directors attempting to influence a direction. Rather, research should be used as a tool that adds to the evidence and knowledge base that can help in the decision process.

## COMMUNICATION THEORY

The ability to verbally express a message and to listen and interpret what others say is a critical management skill that every leader-manager needs to master. An effective executive director must be able to communicate complicated plans to the board, such as engaging in organizational change and describing the processes that s/he will follow to accomplish strategic initiatives.

An executive director who is not articulate can unintentionally obstruct change efforts. This can occur when the executive director lapses into speaking in jargon that will seem like a foreign language to most if not all board members. Since the use of speech is such a common activity in the boardroom, some executive directors may not reflect on the complications that can occur through their attempt to communicate ideas. However, communicating a message is far more complicated than it seems because people assign meaning to the words they hear, they react to the tone of voice of the speaker, and they look for consistency between what is said and the behaviors of the speaker. Consequently, an executive director's style of communication can have an effect on the results of problem-solving an issue during a board meeting.

In their book *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) suggest that the nuances of human communication can cause systemic interaction problems that are characterized as personal or relationship confusion. Confusion can occur because when people speak, they are communicating two messages simultaneously. They communicate a verbal message and a relational message. Verbal messages are content oriented and provide meaning through the information that is conveyed. At the same time, a relational message is sent that qualifies the original message through nonverbal means. The relational message can be delivered through the tone of the speaker when using an angry voice or using a jovial tone. Relational messages can also be conveyed through physical behaviors such as smiling or frowning, crying or laughing, or through body posture that

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conveys interest or detachment from the discussion. The relational message is also referred to as a metacommunication, because it is a message about a message. Receiving a relationship message is euphemistically known as “reading between the lines.”

Whether or not we are aware of it, our selective methods of communication define our relationships with the people we communicate with. Consequently, human communication not only conveys content in the messages, but also transmits some emotional element that defines the relationship between the message sender and receiver. While the idea of sending a message to another person seems like a simple process, it is probably one of the most complex forms of interaction between two or more people. For some reason, messages can become distorted or interpreted incorrectly. Consider the popular party game of telephone where a message is passed on from one person to another person and the last person reveals a completely different message from the original one. This simple game also demonstrates how easy it is for a message to be unintentionally altered.

The use of language can produce perceptual changes through modifications of voice and behavior. Human actions are often in response to the meaning that a listener gives to the words that he or she hears. Whether information is provided to the board of directors in a written report or verbally presented, the social worker should have observation skills and the ability to assess whether the board members are receiving the messages as intended. Additionally, the social worker should understand that certain words or topics may trigger a positive or negative response among board members.

The assignment of meaning that individuals give to words is a complex process that can lead to semantic problems and misunderstanding. A simple benign statement can be misinterpreted by the receiver of the message, such as the example of a statement interpreted as criticism when the intent of the sender was to convey an admiring remark. The subtleties that surround communication that help us assign meaning to the words we hear are learned through observation, trial and error, and mainly through the routine of message sending and receiving.

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How a person goes about assigning meaning of words is a function of one's upbringing, personality, and cultural background. However, in a boardroom setting it may require several meetings before the executive director can comfortably assign meaning and intent to what a board member says or does. As a keen observer, the social worker as executive director will eventually be in a position to determine the personality traits of board members with whom s/he will attempt to send and receive messages. Why not take the simple route of just asking board members to explain the cultural nuances of how they sent, received, and interpreted the messages? It would be socially awkward to ask board members to examine and then elucidate the meaning of their own words and intentions. Most of the time when people communicate verbally, they are quite certain that their message was clear and should be understood.

Board members and executive directors sometimes assign negative motives to other board members based on associating what was said and using a different frame of reference. As an example, I recall a colleague who was asked to set up an executive committee meeting during an off period. The executive director was fearful that the purpose of the special meeting was to ask for her resignation. In fact, it was a meeting to provide an unexpected increase in salary and a bonus for going beyond the goal achievements that were established with the board's executive committee, which substituted for a personnel committee. She learned that the board chair wanted to cancel the next meeting of the executive committee due to several officers having conflicts. He did not think it would be fair to wait three more months to provide her with the raise and bonus.

Given all of the possible places and ways that a message can be distorted, there is a very good reason why most people state that "poor communication" is the major reason for conflict in either their interpersonal or business lives. From all of this, we can deduce that to be an effective manager and leader of a human service organization, an executive director must acquire the skill and ability to scrutinize messages, both verbal and nonverbal. Moreover, to be effective during a board

meeting, the executive director should be observing the reactions of board members to determine how a message is being accepted. Without asking board members for their opinion on what was said, the executive director should have a good understanding of the meta-communication.

### **SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY**

This theory should be familiar to social workers since it is applied to all clinical relationships or the relationships that occur in groups. However, a simple way of explaining this theory to individuals who are unfamiliar with it is to imagine going to the market to purchase a loaf of bread. Assume that the loaves of bread are similar. One loaf costs \$2.99 and the other costs \$7.55. If you are like most individuals, you will choose the \$2.99 loaf because you either see an even exchange or believe you are getting a bargain. Monetary exchanges for products occur all the time and consumers want their purchases to have a similar value for the money they give in exchange for the product. If you make a purchase and see the same product for less in a nearby market, you might feel that the purchase was not the bargain you thought and will now become dissatisfied. In some cases, you might even go back to the original market and complain that you want to return the item or ask the store to live up to its lower cost pledge to sell the item at the competitor's price.

An analogous type of cost/benefit analysis occurs with interpersonal relationships between individuals and groups. The theory represents a decision process that individuals experience when assessing the nature and value of their relationship with others. Since the board member is engaging in the expenditure of time, energy, and perhaps contributing money, this theory informs the board member whether s/he is receiving as much or more from the give and take (i.e., the social exchange) of the relationship with other board members or the executive director. If board members do not believe they are receiving an

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equal amount or more benefits in exchange for their time and energy, then one of three dynamic responses will likely occur. One response is to cut down on the frequency of attending board and committee meetings, or respond by attending meetings but leaving early, or respond by terminating the relationship with the board of directors. As long as board members perceive they are receiving greater rewards than the costs they are expending by being on the board, they will continue their board service and preserve their board and executive director relationships.

### **UNCERTAINTY REDUCTIONS THEORY**

This theory especially applies when recruiting new board members or when a board prospect becomes a new board member and meets all the board members for the first time. Meeting people for the first time can cause certain anxiety or discomfort, perhaps even some level of fear of being rejected or disliked. The theory explains why individuals engage in behaviors to reduce the uncertainty of not knowing someone in the initial stages of interaction. The cultivation of a new board prospect is the initial stage of relationship development and is known as the entry stage. This is the time to get to know the board prospect and the board prospect begins to learn something about the individuals s/he is meeting with or is provided with information about the other members on the board. The second phase, known as the personal stage, occurs when the nominating group of board members shares something about themselves. The board prospect also reveals something about her/himself. For example, the board members at the “get to know you” lunch may describe how much their joining the board has meant to them. They may also include personal stories as to the reason they believe in the human service organization’s mission. Also, the board prospect might discuss his or her potential interests in joining and why s/he would be a good fit as a board member. After the personal stage in which the individuals each determine their comfort

and compatibility with each other, the exit stage comes into play. The exit stage is decision time. The board members and the board prospect must decide whether they want to continue their exploration of board candidacy.

### **COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY**

This theory was created by Howard Giles, a professor of communication at the University of California. Given his area of expertise, Giles classified his theory as a communication theory. While it certainly is, his theory is also a helpful tool for our comprehension about the dynamics of interpersonal relationships among board members and the executive director.

Social workers may be familiar with the theory because its application has been used to explain social differences and create intervention methods for improving the interaction among diverse populations. In the boardroom, board members and the executive director rely on spoken language for their participation in meetings. Meaning is conveyed through language and gestures and can be a force in bringing people together. It could also hamper relationship development if the spoken words have different meaning among the board participants and the differences of understanding lead to confusion, antagonism, or disinterest.

As a careful observer of interaction among people, you will find individuals engaged in imitating behavior. This is not the type of mimicking that occurs when individuals are attempting to be funny or when someone is angry and imitates another person to be condescending. Imitation often happens unconsciously. For example, if you are engaged in a discussion with a small group of people and you take your hands and position them in the back of your head with elbows out as a support, it is likely that in a short while a member of the group will imitate that behavior without much awareness and place their hands on the back of their head with elbows out. Another example of

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imitating behavior could occur if one person leans back in a chair. Often someone in the room will lean back in their chair, too. Pay attention to the use of words that come up in conversation and you are likely to find that others engaged in the conversation will resort to using some of the same words.

When board members use similar words and behaviors this dynamic is known as convergence, and it can create a zone of comfort. Thus, the effect of engaging in similar patterns of communication is that it could lead to agreement and stronger relationships. It is possible for the executive director to purposefully adjust his or her communication patterns and gestures to match the gestures or language of a board member with the purpose of seeking approval.

This purposeful imitating behavior is meant to reduce the social differences between people. However, if the communication does not come across as sincere, it is possible that the board member will consider the verbal exchange as unfriendly or even hostile.

### **SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY**

This theory has relevance for our work with boards of directors. The principal aspect of the theory is that social identity is shaped by an individual's group membership. As applied, the focus is on the individual board member and a belief that his or her social identity, self-image, and self-esteem are in part shaped by being a member of a specific board of directors. Henri Tajfel's theory suggests that board members may exaggerate their ideas about the board. For example, they may believe the board is more successful than it is. The idea that they are serving along with very prominent leaders who have high-level social contacts in the community makes them believe they are part of a special group. The result is an enhancement of the board member's self-image. Participation as a board member is considered to be belonging to an in-group. Individuals who serve on the boards of other community organizations would be out-groups.



### **Theories to Understand Boards**

An executive director would apply this theory to strengthen board member relationships and personal commitments. One application of the theory is to take individual board members to lunch. During this lunch meeting, the executive director would reinforce the positive aspects about the board of directors, noting how well each board member works collaboratively with the other board members. The executive director would thank the board member for their continued support and stress how special and successful the organization has become as a result of the commitment of the board members.