Guidance for Directors and Leaders of Agricultural Organizations in New Jersey

Fact Sheet 1250





Cooperative Extension

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Introduction

Directors of organizations essentially direct "the organization". First, to be a director of an organization the person is generally required to be a member of the represented organization.

Within the organization, it is the responsibility of the board of directors to create and maintain momentum of the organization. Without strong, committed directors, organizations usually do not meet their mission and the lack of success goes further beyond the director board; it affects the entire membership they are representing. Actions and decisions of directors of agricultural organizations can sometimes affect the entire agricultural industry. Therefore, it is pertinent that directors understand and take seriously their duties to represent the larger group. Directors of agricultural organizations can be catalysts for positive changes that will help sustain the agriculture industry in New Jersey.

Expectations of a Director

- Essential to renew your annual membership with the organization
- Agree with and support the organization's mission
- Understand the organization's by-laws
- Understand your responsibilities as the organization's director
- Regularly attend and participate in meetings
- Participate by speaking up about issues, especially when you have knowledge of the subject and/or an opinion
- Be willing to take a leadership role to represent your organization when needed
- Be informed of the facts that are being dealt with in your organization
- Be able to make reasonable inquiries and judgments on issues that arise
- Be able to represent the membership in good faith, without conflicts of interest, bias or outside/inside influences
- If unable to effectively serve as a director, have the strength of character to realize you are not fulfilling your role and make the decision to resign

Keeping an Organization Viable

Focusing on Direction

One of the best ways to have direction in any organization is to have a mission statement. A mission statement should focus on a main goal of the organization. Additionally, articles of incorporation or bylaws of most organizations usually include a mission statement. After a mission statement is created, it should be reintroduced and reviewed on a regular basis to make sure the organization is moving in the intended direction.

Here is an example of a mission statement:

> *The Banana Growers Association of New Jersey is the state organization of banana growers. Our organization is dedicated to the preservation of banana farms, farmers, farm families, associated agricultural businesses, and allied industries and institutions. This will be accomplished by being actively involved in all issues related to the banana industry and agriculture issues.*

Having a Plan

Another important role of a board of directors is to have a strategic plan to carry out the mission statement.

Goals and Objectives

Why does the organization exist? That is in the mission statement. Now, how will the organization complete the mission?

Luckily, in agriculture there is a passion about the industry and within agricultural organizations, since ultimately, those involved are working to support their livelihoods and realize the products of their industry are considered necessities for life. However, not every resident knows or understands this fact and getting that message out to the non-agrarian public should be a primary goal of organizations to garner support. Goals and objectives of an organization may change, however the mission should remain the same.

Finances

Having a business plan to handle finances, fundraising and responsibly handle the funds of the organization is an important factor. The business plan will help guide directors on making decisions that are in the best interest of the organization, will charge the budget/finance committee with coming up with proposals for the directors to vote on, and will help to make responsible decisions about the organization's funds. Directors should never consider an organization's funds as "their own" and should never act alone in any financial decision-making. All expenditures or solicited funds should fit the mission of the organization, and all financial decisions need approval by the board of directors. Additionally, an organization's accounts should undergo an annual audit to make sure fiscal goals, budgets and management of funds are being properly met. Depending on how the organization was set up (non-profit, incorporated, etc.) certain state and federal laws may dictate how funds are taxed, audited, etc. Be sure to seek outside advice from a professional (attorney or accountant) if assistance is needed to comply with state or federal finance laws.

Public Relations

Since the board of directors represents the organization to the public, it is important for directors to be informed on agricultural topics, especially those related to their own commodities and businesses. Directors may be asked to be contacts for the media when questions arise.

For example: If the region's blueberry crop is damaged by frost in spring and a news reporter wants to talk to a farmer to get a direct perspective on how their crop is affected, a director from a blueberry organization could be the media contact for that question.

Delegating Responsibilities

A board of directors should run like a "well-oiled" machine that has all of its parts working together. This means that everyone should play a role in the workings of the board and no one person should do all things. One way to achieve this goal is to delegate tasks by establishing working committees. Committees may be created for different commodity groups, issues or categories important to the board. For instance, having a budget and finance committee to help the treasurer manage the board's funds and to do fundraising. When officers delegate responsibilities to directors, it is also a great way to foster leadership opportunities and allow directors to contribute to the board other than just being an attendee at regular meetings.

Communicating with Members

As a board of directors, it is important to keep your membership informed of the activities of the board. To communicate board of directors' activities, a newsletter, email distribution list, website and or blog is a good way to provide information to members. Even if it is only an annual newsletter to your membership to update them on who is on the directors list, who are the officers and any highlighted activities of the board in the past year, it is important to communicate to keep member support. Additionally, many organizational structures require an annual meeting of the membership and that is a good time to send out an update along with the notification letter of the annual meeting. Fostering and cultivating membership in an organization is critical. In addition, new directors come from the membership and keeping this group informed will help garner new directors for the future.

Mentoring

As new directors come onto a board, it can be important for them to be mentored by experienced directors. These mentor directors can help new directors learn about the issues and responsibilities they will face while serving their term. As a mentor, you may let the new director know they can contact you between meetings if questions come up. You may also invite a new director to attend other events that will offer networking or educational experiences that will foster their growth and leadership skills.

Being More than a Director - Leadership

It is important to develop leadership within an organization's directorship. Board members should maintain a certain level of respect in the community in which they serve. Directors should also have experiences in the agricultural industry that are to the benefit of the organization. This includes having knowledge of agricultural commodity groups related to your area of farming, agricultural agencies, agricultural programs and educational opportunities. All of this comes with being involved with your industry. Additionally, your influence as a director of an agricultural organization can help garner support that is needed to influence legislation, influence public budget allocations for agricultural programs, market the industry in a positive manner, and promote public support of your industry.

Taking on a Role as an Officer

A director may be asked to move up to an officer position on a board. This may include a term as vice president and then perhaps becoming president. The secretary of the board is also an important role that includes keeping minutes, making sure correspondence of the board is properly handled, and may include other organizational duties. The treasurer is a very important duty since handling money belonging to the organization is a major responsibility that should never be taken lightly. The duties, term limits and expectations of board officers and directors should be listed in the by-laws.

Leadership Roles Outside of the Board

Representatives from agricultural organizations are also needed to bring the message of your group to other industry related groups. Besides attending regular board meetings, directors will be asked, on occasion, to represent the board and membership as a delegate to other agricultural groups. Before delegates attend events, views of the director board are to be discussed about issues that may come up at a meeting, caucus or convention. Delegates should discuss the issues with the board of directors and vote on the issues based on the views of the board, which may or may not be their own personal views. Regular events where delegates are needed to represent agricultural organizations are at the State Agricultural Convention and meetings prior to that event.

New Jersey State Board of Agriculture, Caucus Meetings and Convention Directors from agricultural organizations are asked to select delegates each year to attend regional caucus meetings and the State Agricultural Convention. Caucus meetings are where nominations for state board of agriculture members take place and issues are discussed. Traditionally, the annual caucus meetings for South Jersey are held in Atlantic County and the North Jersey Caucus meetings take place in Morris County. Actual elections for members of the State Board of Agriculture take place at the annual convention by the voting delegation.

As a delegate to the State Agricultural Convention, participants learn how the State Board of Agriculture works, how this group directs the NJDA and influences issues affecting the agricultural industry. When starting out as a director of an agricultural organization and eventually moving into leadership roles, some directors may decide to run for a NJ State Board of Agriculture position to help improve the industry.

The New Jersey State Board of Agriculture is the leadership group that directs the New Jersey State Department of Agriculture (NJDA). The members are elected by delegates from the agriculture community to the legislatively established, annual State Agricultural Convention each winter. Ultimately, these recommendations are made to the Governor of New Jersey who with the State Senate approves appointments to the Board. Farmer-members of the State Fish and Game Council are also selected at the Convention. As agricultural delegates to the caucus meetings and convention, it is important to take this task seriously and realize that your discussions and votes will impact the future of the agricultural industry in New Jersey.

Conclusion

Taking on the role as a director of an agricultural organization can be a rewarding experience. Other directors, agricultural agency liaisons, agricultural educators and guests attending regular meetings can be an excellent source of information for those around the table. The time and participation a director devotes may seem great, however, the benefits of knowledge about what is going on in the industry, and the opportunity to help others and even your own business, may be well worth the time spent serving on an organization's board of directors.

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