

# Governing Beyond the Boardroom

## Reigniting the Ambassadorial Role

A VISION Management Services Perspective by Ruth Armstrong and Sandi Trillo

*Lyn Baptist is a veteran non-profit board member who exemplifies the notion of the board member as “ambassador”. She is passionate about improving the wellbeing of children and families and has served on many boards as a way of making a difference. Lyn learns about an organization’s programs, services and clients; and she offers her skills, experience, connections and perspectives. Beyond the boardroom, she has opened doors; attracted friends who have become donors or volunteers; championed innovative programs; and spread the word about an organization’s work in the community.*

We interviewed Lyn about her ambassadorial approach to governance because of the impact she’s had. While the ambassadorial role is not new, it seems to have waned, despite the fact that many boards are populated by would-be ambassadors who are passionate, skilled and networked. Few organizations today seem to encourage or support board members to take on this valuable role.

**In the start-up phase of an organization, many board members naturally assume an ambassadorial role.** They reach out to friends, family, neighbours, and colleagues, driven by a passionate belief in a cause and a desire to act. Start-up phases are often characterized by few or no staff, and so board members do whatever it takes to build the organization. Not surprisingly, roles and responsibilities are rarely defined; and in the absence of an Executive Director (ED), board members connect to external stakeholders as a critical part of establishing and growing the organization.

Once the board succeeds in establishing the organization, they hire an ED to lead it. The

ED takes on many of the roles formerly assumed by the board; and the ‘line’ between operations and governance is drawn. In the process, the board’s role is contained and its scope narrowed. While this has reduced the time commitment for busy board members, it has led to disengagement and dissatisfaction. Many board members comment that the governance work they’re asked to do does not leverage their skills and talents or engage their passion for the cause.

**The ambassadorial role has faded and the board’s role has lost some of its appeal.**

It’s time to reignite this role. Board members who act as ambassadors are more actively engaged, committed and satisfied. Through this role they can make a significant difference on behalf of an organization, its clients and community.

The role of ambassador is underemphasized within a board member’s multiple roles and responsibilities. Few board members, particularly those who are new to governance, recognize the potential of governing beyond the boardroom. By neglecting to encourage this role, **organizations are underutilizing their most valuable volunteer resource.** As ambassadors, board members can amplify the organization’s message and presence; access resources; expand and strengthen community relationships; bring in external perspectives; and influence the larger system.

**Board members bring expertise, resources, networks, and social capital.**

These qualities enable them to connect with community, the business sector and government from a unique vantage point.

Some individuals naturally assume an ambassadorial role. Others may be willing, but have not been encouraged or are unclear about what to do. And for some individuals the role will hold no appeal.

## AMBASSADORIAL ARCHETYPES

*“Today’s board members are recruited for skills and knowledge... to be an ambassador they also need to have passion.”*

*Lyn Baptist*

Individuals with different skills, talents and passions embrace different aspects of the ambassadorial role. We’ve identified four ambassadorial archetypes that reflect different personalities, skills and interests. Lyn personifies a Connector-Storyteller.

**Can you see yourself or one of your board members in any of these archetypes?**

**Connectors:** connectors seem to know everyone and like to make connections. They are happiest linking people and are keen to open doors, and make introductions to organizations or people in the community. They are not shy about using their contacts to help an organization ‘raise friends’ or funds.

**Boundary spanners:** spanners have roots in different cultural and socio-economic communities and this gives them a unique ability to bridge different worlds. They act as interpreters and bring different communities together to facilitate shared understanding. They initiate collaborations and build consensus. They are well positioned to relay messages and bring community perspectives into the organization.

**Storytellers:** these individuals have a deep understanding of an organization’s cause and work. They tell compelling stories and tailor them to different audiences – funders, corporations or their neighbours. They

communicate their passion to a crowd, or one-on-one. They help an organization raise friends and resources.

**Hunter-gatherers:** these people are well-networked and resourceful – they know where to get things at low or no cost and are willing to ask for contributions on behalf of an organization. They are natural negotiators and pursue alternative ways to get things done.

**Ambassadors are active... they do things** (see box on next page). Of all the things they do, the act of bridge building may offer the greatest potential for non-profit organizations that believe they have a role to play in bringing together different cultural and socio-economic groups. This role appears increasingly important today given the growing economic and social divides in Canadian society. There are fewer social spaces for informal, accidental interactions among diverse groups. So communities must be intentional in creating these opportunities and spaces. Interactions among different groups can lead communities to a richer understanding of their issues and the identification of creative solutions.

Educational forums, recreational events and open houses represent bridging opportunities – where communities served by the organization come together with board members’ networks. In these gatherings an organization can draw on a wider range of community assets to work with the community in defining and addressing their issues. Lyn Baptist views this and other forms of community engagement to be a core part of the board’s stewardship role. This work requires governing beyond the boardroom.

## WHAT AMBASSADORS DO

- **Spread the word:** talk about the organization and its cause within their networks
- **Engage their networks:** identify and invite experts to educate the board and/or staff; invite their contacts to organizational events
- **Build bridges:** connect the organization with others in its environment - those it serves, other agencies, business, and funders; facilitate information exchange and two-way communication; participate in board-to-board discussions
- **Lend credibility:** accompany the ED to meetings with key stakeholders; participate in organizational events
- **Sustain and grow revenue sources:** establish or deepen relationships with foundations, sponsors and donors (e.g. make thank-you calls); host friend raisers (informational dinners with or without a financial ask) and fundraisers
- **Broker new connections:** identify community resources and explore relationships that could advance the organization's mission

## REIGNITING THE FLAME

Is your organization interested and ready to reignite and tend the ambassadorial flame? This decision is something the board chair and ED need to agree on. Assessing the organization's readiness is a good place to start. **Ask:**

1. Do we have 2-3 people on the board who have expressed an interest in or are engaging in ambassadorial activities?
2. Are we prepared to support ambassadorial activities – do we have the energy and are we willing to equip board members for this role?
3. Are we under-utilizing our board members?

4. Is the board chair already or willing to act as a role model?
5. Does the ED feel comfortable having board members participate beyond the boardroom?

**If you answered 'yes' to most of the questions above, you're ready to engage the rest of the board in discussing how to reignite the ambassadorial flame.**

Ambassadors must be able to speak knowledgeably and diplomatically about the organization and its impact. Board members require a variety of tools to succeed in this role. What's in your toolkit? Review the list below to determine which tools you need to develop to equip your ambassadors.

### Ambassadorial Toolkit

- An orientation:** to the organization's vision, mission and values; populations served; programs, services and impacts; mentoring options for ambassadors
- Several 'elevator' speeches:** brief descriptions of the organization's work and impact tailored to different audiences
- Compelling stories or anecdotes:** which illustrate organizational impact and have an emotional hook
- Presentation materials:** brochures, a slide presentation and board business cards highlighting your organization's vision, mission or tag line
- Responses to "How can I help?":** scripted options... "Contribute your expertise as a volunteer/committee/board member"; "Make a donation"
- A process for closing the loop:** e.g. where to relay information learned from community members; where to direct community members who want to get involved
- Online and texting donation options:** a donation button or link on a website; a way to donate through cell phones

- ❑ **Stakeholder map:** an inventory of individuals and groups the organization works with or would like to connect with
- ❑ **Ambassadorial guidelines:** defined objectives, possible activities and things to keep in mind

**Imagine the potential** of a board comprised of well-equipped ambassadors who amplify the organization's work and messages in the community. These board members are actively engaged and work in partnership with the ED. The Connectors, Boundary-

spanners, Storytellers and Hunter-gatherers apply their talents and engage their networks on behalf of the organization and those it serves. By doing so, the board expands awareness, builds relationships and attracts resources. By governing beyond the boardroom, board members stay engaged, are better-informed about the external environment, and are more effective in their strategy making. **The difference they make is clear... the cause and the organization are better known, connected, informed and resourced.**

**Interview:** Lyn Baptist is Chair of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and Chair of SNAP's Business Advisory Committee (SNAP is a program developed by the Child Development Institute, an accredited children's mental health organization). She has served on many boards over the years. We thank her for sharing her experiences and offering her insights for this article.

**Authors:** Ruth Armstrong and Sandi Trillo of VISION Management Services co-authored this article in September 2012. VISION Management Services ([www.vision-management.ca](http://www.vision-management.ca)) is a Toronto-based consulting firm specializing in non-profit governance, strategic planning, leadership development and collaboration. Ruth and Sandi can be reached at: 416-691-7302 or by email: [rutharmstrong@vision-management.ca](mailto:rutharmstrong@vision-management.ca); [sanditrillo@vision-management.ca](mailto:sanditrillo@vision-management.ca).

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