



BoardLink

Your connection to effective bar governance

A Deferring Board?

Taken from "Tales from the Boardroom," in the Winter 2011 issue of BoardLink

Our scenario:

In 2007, the president of the State Bar Association wanted professionalism to be the emphasis of his term, and for the bar to create a professionalism program. The program he and the staff developed was well received at the time, but the energy surrounding it waned when his term ended. While the president felt it was an important topic, it wasn't an organizational priority supported by the other officers and the board. By 2010, program attendance was low. Those who did attend were leaders in the bar community, but not those for whom the program was intended. In 2010, registration fees failed to cover the cost of the program and members' dues dollars subsidized the shortfall.

As the board worked with the finance committee to develop a balanced budget for 2011, the board decided to eliminate the professionalism program along with two other programs that were expensive to run and were not having the desired effect. When the past president got word that the program would be eliminated, he made an impassioned plea to keep it, emphasizing the necessity for a forum for exchange on professionalism topics. The board was swayed and balanced the budget instead through a variety of other cuts.

So, what's the problem?

It's possible the board made the best decision in this situation. However, this scenario raises a couple of important issues:

1. **Success measures are important to evaluate program impact. They also can help mitigate the *personal*.** This board intuited that the professionalism program was marginal, but there weren't agreed-upon expectations that allowed the board to evaluate the program objectively. In this case, the lack of clear expectations may have left the board susceptible to one president's force of personality. Did the board truly make the best decision for the organization, or was it the easier decision?

Who is responsible for setting priorities? The board appears to have yielded to this individual president to set direction for the organization. While professionalism is an important topic, this issue wasn't at the top of the bar's priority list. Whose responsibility is it to ask tough questions and help steer the president closer to the organization's most pressing needs? (Hint: It should be a collaborative effort.) In fact, the board and staff should work together to keep leadership focused on the issues that are most critical to the bar's success.