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		October 2007
<h2>Economic Development Newsletter</h2>		
In This Issue		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">As I See ItRegister for Upcoming Webinars		
Board Governance Tuesday, October 30 2:00 pm CST		
More Information		
Ady International Webinars Bob Ady Ady International		
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As I See It

The lack of (abundance of?) leadership hinders the success of too many economic development organizations.

By Bob Ady



In many organizations, there are so many "directors" on the governing board or the executive committee that it becomes more an honorary designation than a leadership position. I have received letters from some economic development organizations where not only one side of the stationery was filled with a listing of all the names of the board of directors, but so was the other side. My desire has always been to call some of the people listed to see if they are still alive.

Many economic development organizations justify the large number of board or executive committee members in their governing body because these individuals' positions are often tied to fundraising, politics, and/or visibility. That is all well and good but hardly necessary for the efficient handling of economic development matters. In fact, my guess is that if all the board members of some organizations showed up for a meeting, they'd have to rent an auditorium to hold them all.

To me, there are three issues that economic development organizations need to address:

1. How can we achieve a unified direction for our economic development program?
2. How can we make critical decisions in a time-effective manner?
3. How should this group interface with corporate prospects and site selectors?

Most economic development organizations spend much time, effort, and money developing strategic plans to chart a future path of growth for the community. They dutifully solicit significant input from all the stakeholders, refining and revising the plan numerous times. And then they present the plan to their leadership for approval. At this stage, many a plan that seemed like a slam dunk is destined to a slow and painful death. The leadership, paralyzed by its bloated size, simply cannot muster up approval.

I have been shown three-year plans where the time period to be covered by the plan has actually passed and the plan was still not approved. What message does that send to the economic development staff? More importantly, what message does that send to prospective relocating or expanding companies? I can tell you, as a site selector, that we are looking for reasons to eliminate communities, and lack of a unified direction is a no-brainer.

As the chain of command and the number of participants

increase, decision time for any issue increases exponentially. As a site selector with an ever-shorter timeframe for presenting location decisions to my clients, ambiguity or indecisiveness definitely works against communities unable or incapable of making speedy decisions about any aspect of the site selection process.

Finally, with outsized boards and bloated executive committees, what role should they play when the prospect comes to town? As I have mentioned before, whenever non-professionals in economic development interface with prospects, there is risk. Although well meaning, frequently the wrong things are said that can undo all the previous work of the economic development staff. Equally troublesome for the corporate location team is that many members of the board and the executive committee want to meet with them during community visits. This can create hard feelings among board or executive committee members not selected for such a meeting.

What's the magic number - how many "directors" is the right number? There is no one-size-fits-all answer, and size alone is just one factor to consider. Some of the practices used by the best economic development organizations include the strategic use of term limits; the assignment of subcommittees or task forces focused on economic development; and ongoing training geared at educating all directors about the site selection process so that that when a deal comes to town, they'll already be prepared.

As I see it, having strong, directed, and focused board governance is critical to the success of economic development organizations. When it's working, nobody notices. When it's not, you can't help but notice - and it can cripple the organization's ability to effectively court business expansion.

Ady International Webinars

Webinar: Board Governance

Tuesday, October 30, 2:00 pm CST

Economic Development Boards can have a huge impact on the site selection process. The Board Members and their actions are critical to a successful economic development campaign. Learn how the best boards operate and what trends are impacting boards today.

Bob Ady, President of Ady International Company has located more facilities in the U.S. than any other individual,

and brings years of site selection expertise to the table. Karen Buellesbach, President of Management Training Professionals has 20+ years in the Human Resource field with expertise in organizational development, team dynamics and executive coaching.

Don't miss this lively session led by experts in their respective fields as we explore the latest trends in governance facing community boards.

During this webinar, we will discuss the following and related topics:

- Who should be on your board and what is the role of your board in the site selection process?
- How do the best boards operate? What are the Do's and Dont's of Board Governance?
- How effective is your board? How can board performance be improved?
- How important are board members to economic development programs?
- What are some of the biggest mistakes boards make and how do you prevent them from happening?
- What do site selection consultants expect from a community board?
- What are some of the latest trends in ED boards?

This 60 minute webinar will include a presentation, question and answer session and a copy of the presentation content downloadable in a PDF format after completing a brief anonymous post webinar survey.

Price: \$150.00

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Ady International Company is the authority on site selection. Our principal, Robert M. Ady, has conducted more corporate relocations in the United States than any other individual. He brings a wealth of experience to your site selection project, as well as longstanding relationships with economic development organizations nationwide.

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