

Preparing for Historical Accusations of Abuse: A Board-Level Drill

Values — plural noun, /'valyoōs/

A person or organization's principles or standards of behavior; one's judgment of what is important in life.

Chances are, every youth-serving community organization has a set of defined values to which its leadership, board, employees and volunteers are expected to adhere. Yet it is a fact of human life that the same words can mean different things for different people. The worst time to discover that your team's values are not aligned is when you are trying to navigate through a crisis.

As states around the country expand the rights of survivors of sexual abuse, there will be a sharp increase in the number of historical incidents to which youth-serving community organizations will be called to respond. And while we are now well trained to deal with cases involving children currently in your programs, we need exactly the same preparedness to respond to an adult who alleges abuse that happened years—and even decades—ago.

Values will be central to navigating such cases effectively and ethically.

The following exercise will help ensure that your organization's board is prepared to respond to historical allegations of abuse—and to do so in a manner that is both consistent with your organizational values and puts the needs and well-being of survivors at the heart of your decision making.

Process

Step One

In advance of your next regularly scheduled board meeting, inform your board chair and staff leadership that you will be holding this exercise. Share this document so that they know what to expect, and discuss with them any anticipated problems and how you plan to follow up with board members afterwards.

Step Two

Schedule a ten- to fifteen-minute discussion for the start of your board meeting in which you read and review your organization's values and what they mean to the group.

Step Three

On completion of that exercise, explain to your board that the agenda for the meeting has changed—and that you have urgent news that you need to discuss with them. The following is intended as a suggested script, but please feel free to adapt to make it authentic and believable to your organization:

I'm glad that we had time to review our organizational values today because they have never been more critical. I have important news I need to share with you, and I'm going to need your help.

Yesterday, I received a voicemail from a thirty-five year old man/woman who used to be a participant in our programming. They told me in that message that they want to talk to me about several incidents of sexual abuse that happened here over a period of several months, and that the perpetrator was a member of our staff. They didn't provide more details than that, but here's what I need from you:

- *First, I need your permission to call them back.*
- *Second, I need you to know that I'm going to tell them I'm here for them, I believe them, and I'm going to do what I can to get them the help they need.*
- *Finally, I need your support and commitment—here and now—that we are going to get to the bottom of these allegations, regardless of what other facts may come to light.*

Step Four

At this point, we recommend that you open up the meeting to discussion—and you record and take note of how your board responds.

Step Five

Once you have a good sense of the shape of the conversation, you can reveal that this was a drill—and explain that the purpose was to make sure that you are fully aligned on how to respond historical cases of abuse before they come to light. (Check with the board here to see how they are feeling—this is an emotionally charged topic and some may have direct life experiences that make it challenging.)

If the group decided to direct you to engage with the survivor in a way that is consistent with your organization's values, congratulations. Celebrate the fact that you have a mission-focused, values-driven group of volunteers. If the direction of the group was different (“don't call back”, “circle the wagons”, “have an attorney call them back”...) decide with your Board Chair if that's the right time to help the group come to another position—or if that conversation should come later. Either way, the conflict must be addressed before an allegation arises and it's far better to have identified it in advance.

Then spend a little time educating your board on the changing legal landscape—either referencing specific statutes of limitation in your jurisdiction, or the more general trends we are seeing in terms of news stories. Be sure to include reference to what is happening to organizations that chose to hide abuse events or hope they would go away (Boy Scouts, the Catholic Church, Olympic sports...) Explain to your board that you are recommending it become written policy that you respond to any historical allegations in the manner they described—if they came to the right approach. If not, there's important work ahead.

Important Note: We believe a drill like this is a powerful tool for both ascertaining the current state of board alignment and for working through any tensions that may arise. We are aware, however, that successfully implementing it will require adapting it to your specific circumstances, your specific board, and your appropriate timetable. For this reason, we are not making specific recommendations for how you manage your board's responses—but please do reach out to us should you need help in navigating any and all issues that may come to light as a result of this drill.