

Spies and Nonprofit Boards: Seeking Ground Truth

by Marty Martin JD MPA, Martin Law Firm

“Bond—James Bond!” Those words from the movie Dr. No introduced me to spies.

A visit to Washington, D.C.’s International Spy Museum provided a fascinating look at spies and their history, tools, and techniques. Their “Ground Truth Theater” discussed the 21st century challenge for spies to provide decision makers with unvarnished and objective facts. This factual and objective confirmation and reconciliation of data and multiple perspectives describes the concept of “ground truth”.

Wikipedia suggests the military’s slang definition migrated into current scientific usage. Military slang defines ground truth “to describe the reality of a tactical situation as opposed to what intelligence reports and mission plans assert the reality to be.” A foot soldier’s view differs markedly from a general’s. Both are needed!

Spies seek to secure early, objective, and actionable data for decision makers without direct access and far removed in time and place from a spy’s sources. Decision makers use this information to confirm, deny, test, and modify underlying assumption(s); learn; and, hopefully, make better informed decisions.

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Boards of directors must determine their organization's ground truth. They lack in-depth knowledge derived from daily operations. This is compounded by the quality and timeliness of board information and their substantive preparation for and engagement at meetings. Designed with packed agendas, significant reliance on staff and social functions, members may be distracted by their personal concerns. Board members don't run their own business or personal lives based on a few meetings lasting several hours a year. Yet this is how nonprofit boards govern!

Ground truth should guide board decisions. With access to timely and unfiltered data members first form their assumptions based on ground truth as they understand it. But then members must test their assumptions openly and explicitly through a healthy board's hallmark of give and take discussions.

Boards have implicit and explicit expectations. When ground truth conflicts with expectations, the gap between expected and actual results, whether positive or negative, should prompt the board to examine their underlying assumptions and theories of change. Failing to engage in this analysis or take timely action may have adverse effects.

Conflict often arises when challenging assumptions ("sacred cows"). A board's social nature may seek to limit, if not eliminate, conflict engendered when members assert fundamental differences. Boards may ignore or, worse,

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affirmatively shut down or eliminate dissenting members, thereby creating a perilous “group think” phenomenon! Dissenting views often should be heeded, but particularly when based on ground truth.

Fostering a board culture designed to test assumptions establishes healthy dialog when board members’ differing views emerge. This is why boards meet! Through critical analysis and discussion, board decisions should seek to reflect ground truth. Otherwise, their ability to confront reality and implement change diminishes. Today’s headlines serve as a warning beacon for boards who failed to address their ground truth!

Boards built on ground truth will persevere, survive, and ultimately thrive more readily than those built on the untested and unchallenged gossamer of opinion, feelings, and influence.

How willing is your board to seek ground truth?