Effective nonprofits do not talk much about policy. They talk about work. They define what work each organ is expected to perform and what results each organ is expected to achieve.

One implication of this is that the performance of the entire board, each board committee and each board member—along with the performance of the executive officer and all key people on staff—is regularly appraised against pre-established performance goals. (This appraisal is best done by a small group of former board members.) Board members and executives whose performance consistently falls below goals and expectations will resign or at least not stand for reelection.

To be effective, a nonprofit needs a strong board, but a board that does the board’s work. The board not only helps think through the institution’s mission, it is the guardian of that mission, and makes sure the organization lives up to its basic commitment.

Over the door to the nonprofit’s boardroom there should be an inscription in big letters that says: Membership on this board is not power; it is responsibility. Some nonprofit board members still feel that they are there for the same reasons they used to go on hospital boards in the old days—recognition by the community—rather than because of a commitment to service. Board membership means responsibility not just to the organization but to the board itself, to the staff and to the institution’s mission.
At the same time, only two-way relationships work. An effective nonprofit executive starts building this two-way relationship with the board by asking: “What do you have to tell me?” Not, “This is what I am telling you.”