



RECRUITING EFFECTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

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Does this sound familiar? “You should join the board! It’s a lot of fun, and it’s only a couple of hours a month.” It’s a common problem among non-profit organizations. Convincing people to serve on your board by promising them little work and lots of fun results in board members who don’t know what their responsibilities are, may or may not fit into the board, and are not prepared to represent the organization.

Organizations can greatly benefit from changing the way the board is selected. This article will tell you how to change your board selection from a nominating process to a recruiting process.

BOARD NOMINATING VERSUS VOLUNTEER RECRUITING

For most organizations, the Nominating Committee consists of board members who don’t really want to do committee work. They are given the nominating committee because it is perceived as requiring the least amount of work. Their only job is to make sure that the current board members stay, and find a couple of friends who will come to some meetings. They tell those friends that it’s not much work, and see if they can be lured in. The result is that the board lacks diversity, and the members don’t necessarily have needed skill sets, don’t give or raise money, and don’t understand what work is involved.

The way to change your board is to first change the name of the committee from Nominating to Recruiting, and then expand its work to include recruiting all volunteer leaders, such as members of board committees, as well as the board of directors.

Secondly, change the make-up of committees. Right now, your committees are probably made up only of board members. This is unnecessary. It is sufficient to have each committee chaired by a board member, or have a board member as a liaison from the committee to the board. By having a committee made up of non-board members, the organization can test potential future board members to see if they will work hard on a committee. It’s also a way of using the skills of people who can contribute their talents to the organization, without requiring that they sit through meetings that include things outside their skill sets, like reading financial statements or hearing evaluations on programs.

HOW TO RECRUIT NEW VOLUNTEER LEADERS

I once had the experience of being recruited for two boards simultaneously. (Professional fundraisers like me are quite desirable.) The first group failed to recruit me; the second succeeded. The first group had a staff member make the approach. She told me that I was only needed for a six-month period to fill an empty seat, that it would only be three meetings, and that I wouldn’t have to do much. I told her to recruit someone who would want to serve a future term on the board, so they could use the six-month term as a springboard to being elected.

The second group did a much better job of recruiting me. I was first phoned by an important executive at a large corporation, whom I knew and to whom I owed a favor. She asked me to meet



with leaders of the organization to discuss volunteer leadership opportunities, which might include the board or committee service. I met with two influential local leaders, both board members, who explained the duties and responsibilities of the board. When we were in agreement, they asked me to sign a one-page statement outlining each board member's commitment, before I could be nominated.

The commitment statement, to be signed by each board member, set forth the responsibilities. It read something like this:

- 1) The board is a decision-making body. Each board member commits to attending at least 75% of the monthly board meetings (by phone, if necessary). If I couldn't attend a meeting, I agreed to contact the board chair. If I missed three meetings in a row without excuse, my resignation would be assumed and accepted.
- 2) The board is responsible for hiring the executive director and overseeing that person's work. The executive director oversees the work of staff members: this is not a board role. The board is the boss of the executive director, who is in turn the boss of the staff. Should a board member need something from a staff member, they will make the request of the executive director. Should a staff member have a problem with the executive director, he or she will report it to either the personnel committee of the board or to the board chair directly.
- 3) The board determines the annual budget, with input from the executive director. The board sets the executive director's salary, and assigns an amount for the staff as a group. The executive director determines each staff member's salary, working within the assigned amount.
- 4) The board sets policies and procedures. It does not concern itself with the day-to-day operations of the organization.
- 5) Each board member is responsible for serving on and attending meetings of at least one committee.
- 6) Board service is for a three-year term. There is a limit of three terms before a mandatory leave of at least one year. This ensures that the leadership is refreshed and ready to serve.
- 7) Each board member is responsible for making a personal financial commitment to the organization, in addition to any corporate donations from his/her company. The board is the leadership for the entire organization and intimately knows its programs and finances. If the board members do not lead financially, no one will follow. No minimum amount is set: members are asked to give an amount that makes them proud to be at the table. All board members are listed with their donation amounts in the annual report alongside other donors, within giving categories (e.g. \$250-\$499).
- 8) Each board member solicits donations from others. Solicitation efforts might include: writing to friends, soliciting sponsorships for the annual event, hosting or co-hosting a small event at home, and/or visiting major donors.
- 9) Each board member has a responsibility to understand the organization, nonprofit organizations in general and the requirements of serving on the board. The materials of Board Source (www.boardsource.org) are recommended reading and are quite helpful in understanding these responsibilities. Any board member who does not understand financial statements has access to the board treasurer, CPA, or auditor for assistance.



- 10) Each board member is an ambassador of the organization. The board is expected to speak about the organization, to be knowledgeable about its work and programs, and to represent the organization ably to others.
- 11) All board members, separately and together, represent the highest ethical standards. They are expected to disclose any relationships that might have a financial benefit, and to behave in an ethical manner in all ways and at all times.

This may sound harsh. However, it screens out those who do not understand the nature of nonprofit boards. You may think that people will not want to serve on your board if you ask too much of them.

I challenge the assumption that requirements scare people away. This comes from a mentality of scarcity instead of abundance. There are plenty of people who care about the community in general and want to make the world a better place. If they are approached the right way and helped to understand their responsibilities as well as the benefits of serving on the board, they will be attracted to this difficult but exciting work. Otherwise your board will consist of the first available people instead of the best ones, and the organization will continue to struggle.

DIVERSITY

Another thing that needs to change is the way potential board members are identified. The board should first determine its needs, and then seek new members to meet those needs. For example, the board might need people who understand finances, personnel issues and legal issues. I recommend that the organization find two people for each category. Two people can have productive discussions and help one another. Also, if one person misses a meeting, the second person offers back-up.

The board should consider other elements as well, such as diversity. Diversity is important because most people tend to know others who are like themselves. Married people know other married people, singles know singles, older folks have older friends, and so forth. Greater diversity means more people to be reached by your work, while less diversity means finding donors, for example, from a smaller pool.

A diverse board would include men and women of all ages, married and single, from various ethnic backgrounds, religions, political affiliations, geographical areas and economic levels. Diversity means having different people reaching out to their communities, which will make any organization stronger.

Board recruiting also means finding individuals with expertise in various fields, such as legal, medical, accounting or finance, public relations, or human resources. Business experience and connections are also useful.

Not all board members need to have experience with your particular work. They may be community members who have sympathy towards those you serve without having experienced the need personally. For example, of the two organizations that solicited me for their boards, one was a legal group and the other worked with teenagers. I'm neither a lawyer nor a parent, but as a professional fund raiser I was considered valuable by both.



A LOT TO ASK FROM A SMALL GROUP

I recommend a board of 17-19 people. About one-quarter of the board members will miss any given meeting, leaving a good working group size of about 12 people. Ideally you will have an odd number present to avoid a tied vote. How do you achieve so many skills among so few people? The solution is to have each board member meet multiple needs.

ONE PERSON NOT ON THE BOARD

The executive director should not be on the board of directors. The board oversees the staff. Putting a staff member on the board means a loss of independent thinking. It is hard for board members to regard the staff member as both a peer and an employee. It interferes with the organizational structure. The board then becomes a body that agrees with the staff member, instead of functioning independently.

THE FOUR W's

In recruiting board members, you should consider The Four W's: work, wisdom, wealth and wallop." (Wallop means connections.) Of course board members should work and have wisdom. Along with these, however, they either need to bring personal wealth or connections. If I had the choice, I would choose connections, and a willingness to ask others, over personal wealth. It is better for an organization's health to have ten donors of \$1,000 each than one donor at \$10,000, because one donor can leave, but all ten probably won't. It's also easier to upgrade some of the ten donors to give higher gifts than to get the one donor to give an amount equal to the future gifts of the others.

OTHER IMPORTANT FACTORS

Here are some other important factors to look for when recruiting new board members.

- 1) People who gets along well with others. You don't want people who are antagonistic.
- 2) People who are independent. Too many boards falter because each person was recruited by a friend, and people don't like to contradict their friends.
- 3) People who will work. You can find this out by first recruiting them to a committee, before asking them to serve on the board.
- 4) People who will give and raise money. You can start by recruiting among your major donors and volunteers.

THREE FINAL TRICKS

There are three final tricks to recruiting new volunteer leaders. First, try to recruit outside your social circles: look for people who meet the criteria, even though you may not know them. For example, you might recruit an accounting professional from the National Association of Black Accountants. Second, don't recruit people who are so unique that they have nothing in common



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with the other board members and may feel like tokens. Third, pick the most dynamic board members – who are diverse from each other – to lead the board recruitment. You can call it a Recruiting Task Force and they can return to other board tasks later.