

Board Development & Recruitment Strategy

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Most not-for-profit organizations struggle with maintaining an active, engaged, and intelligent Board of Directors. While there are no shortcuts to the “perfect” non-profit board, there are tried and true strategies that work. These take time and effort, but in the long run the effort pays for itself.

Great Boards do not just happen. There is strategy and work behind every high performance board. Many agencies simply look for bodies willing to serve, or find “resume-builders” in the community interested in gaining local recognition. Some of these folks turn out to be surprisingly talented; most do not.

Board recruitment is similar to staff recruitment. Hire to fill a space and one accepts dead weight. On any board, there is room for at-large members who represent broad constituencies. There are also tremendous needs represented by organizations and board members must be recruited who have the knowledge, connections, and tenacity to address these needs. Therefore, designing a written profile of desired board members marks step one of the recruitment process.

A board member profile is a simple document that outlines the specific traits and talents an individual should exemplify to be considered for membership on the board. For instance, an agency that is anticipating a capital campaign may need someone with connections to wealth throughout the community. Development of the profile starts with the board (and staff and consumers too) brainstorming all the names of people fitting this description that they can muster. No one is ruled out because they might be “too busy,” “over-committed,” or seemingly “uninterested.” During brainstorming the trick is get lots of ideas on paper; editing comes later in the process. The resulting list becomes a call-sheet. The Executive Director or board representative contacts the individuals on the list to feel out their interest and capacity for accomplishing the board role. Even if someone that is contacted is too busy to serve, they probably have an employee, friend, or family member who is interested. Use the meeting to generate more connections. Networking is the process used to recruit the best and the brightest.

The process should entail selecting from more than one candidate. Even in small communities, much talent exists and by making it somewhat difficult to attain board membership, the status of being a board member grows. Ultimately, the organization benefits from having the public perception of exclusivity. This board is the one the community seeks to join because this board has the best members. Selecting anyone who happens to be available drives down the likelihood that the best the community has to offer will ever be interested. Make it hard to become a member; make the work challenging; and the board gains status, power, and impact.

Another concern during recruitment is believing that all organizations need a legal representative and/or an accountant as members. These are back office issues and may or

may not be critical to the board. It is difficult to find attorneys and CPAs with time or interest to be on a board where their talents are used in the same way they are used in their professions. Many people want to be seen as more than their careers, so seek individuals who can use their talents and their broader interests to build the agency. Capitalize on the fact that people are interested in giving back to their communities and that they are intrigued at flexing their muscles and brains by learning new skills and having new experiences. Thoroughly consider how much legal advice is needed by the organization: typically, not much. So buy legal advice and recruit board members who can work on the strategic plan. If understanding money management is an issue, get a local college accounting professor to do a short in-service training for the board on reading balance sheets, and contract with a local CPA for actual accounting services.

Board development also offers opportunities to identify potential hard-working members. Most board members receive very little in the way of training and education about governance. Critical competencies for most non-profit boards include such topics as: human resources management, budgeting, understanding financial statements, best-practice in rehabilitation (or other fields), meeting management, communication and negotiation, et al. In most communities there are local experts in these subject areas. Business owners, sales professionals, college professors, accountants, attorneys and others are often more than willing to give time to charitable organizations by speaking on topics of expertise. Not only do board members learn new and valued skills, but this also presents an opportunity for the organization to showcase its talent, mission, and commitment to the community. Undoubtedly, some of the people doing the training will become patrons of the agency; financial supporters; and, maybe, if they are good enough, future board members.