

Getting the Board You Want, Need and Deserve

YOUR organization has the greatest board in the entire world! Your members are clear about their mandate. They don't micromanage. Their skills and passions are suited to your current challenges and strategic opportunities. They operate effectively as a team, demonstrate integrity and a strong work ethic, are constantly on the lookout for future leadership. And regardless of their committee assignments, they aggressively pursue fundraising opportunities. **RIGHT?**

We hope so, but often we hear of frustration with board members, questions about their dedication, annoyance with their hesitation to embrace their fundraising role. Are they trying to drive you crazy? Likely not. But they are sending a clear message – they may not be ready, willing, or equipped to take on the level of leadership you need.

What DO You Need?

What kind of a board? What authority does it possess? What determines its role and operations? Who's in charge? Your organization's governance model likely dictates a specific type of board with clear parameters regarding scope and authority. A foundation board may be strictly focused on raising funds in one organization, yet in another their job is limited to the allocation of endowment revenue to select initiatives.

Some boards exist to extend the reach of the staff in specific areas; others are purely advisory; most have a hybrid function. The goal is to be clear about the board's mandate and to operate in the most effective way possible.

Work Backwards

Sometimes a board's lack of efficacy is a natural byproduct if the organization has not clarified the role of this leadership body and defined the expectations of board members. Take a good look at your organization – your mission, your vision, your operations and your plan to get to that preferred future. With that in mind, what do you MOST need from a board?

Instead of lamenting what the board may not be doing, reverse engineer. If you were establishing a new board, what would it do? How would it work? Who would you need? Imagine your ideal board – the one that enables your organization to dream more, learn more, do more and become more. Begin with the end in mind; you may think about the board in an entirely new and more productive light.

The Board Litmus Test

Another way to think about it is this: what would happen if all your current board members suddenly vanished? They ALL won the lottery and moved to Tahiti. How would that affect your organization? The experience of staff and those you serve? What crosses your mind when you consider that possibility? What would happen...

- Not much.
- Actually, that would be GREAT and save us a lot of time.
- Well, there's that one woman who's really good.
- It would be devastating!

What does your answer tell you? Not that we want anyone devastated, but imagine what it would be like to have a board contributing so tremendously to your success.

Characteristics of Strong Boards

Use this list for a quick check-up on your board health. If you really need a fundraising board, don't have 17 other committees and then get annoyed when the guy on programs and speakers doesn't leap out of bed each day shouting "Another day to

practice philanthropy in America!" What is MOST needed at this moment in time from your board? That's your clear mandate and it should drive enlistment, training and board activity.

- ✓ Clear Mandate
- ✓ Specific Goals and Objectives to Meet Current Challenges
- ✓ Membership Committed to Mandate and Appropriate to Tasks/Roles
- ✓ Viable Committee Structure
- ✓ Cultivation of Future Leadership
- ✓ Excellent Communication and Work Ethic
- ✓ Strong Board/Staff Relationships
- ✓ Written Expectations

Better with Bylaws

It's surprising that some boards have been underway for years without ever referencing the bylaws or having familiarity with this important document. This is where the board's purpose is defined; where the minimal and maximum number of members is stated (hint: go for the max!); where the committees are identified. It also describes the manner in which the bylaws can be amended. If this area has been neglected of late, take a look. It may be time for an update, or a better adhering to the rules.

Is it the People or...?

Many board challenges stem from not having the right people at the table, or having them there without a clear understanding of what they are expected to do. The board member enlistment process should ensure that you avoid that pitfall. Identify the qualifications and characteristics you most need and then brainstorm potential members. Consider talent, passion, affiliations and the ability to work well with others. Imagine what committees would be best served by future members' expertise and interests. When the list is complete, rank them by desirability, potential impact, and likelihood of agreeing to join.

Once approved for consideration, develop a set of interview questions to ensure each candidate is similarly vetted. Determine who would be the best enlister for each candidate (in other words – to whom can they NOT say "no"?). Prepare them for the initial contact, meeting and follow up. Make sure that if the candidate hesitates about the board member expectations, he or she is offered the option to serve as a committee member without board status. A strong committee structure, populated with non-board members, is a sign of strength and creates a fertile field for future board member recruitment.

Depending on the type of board you are building, this may seem overly orchestrated, but the best members will appreciate the seriousness of your intent and bring that level of dedication to their participation. >>

Minimal Board Member Expectations

A savvy board candidate will ask about the expectations of board members, so make sure you can clearly articulate the minimal standards you have established. This might address board and committee meeting attendance, committee work, interaction with staff/donors/prospects. It will likely remind them of their role as ambassadors, and the understanding that while healthy and respectful debate of ideas in meetings is welcome, once a decision is made all must speak with one voice.

Must they Give?

Expectations in this regard vary based on type of board but, where appropriate, typically include annual giving and special event participation; campaign gifts when in the midst, and ideally bequest intentions. Many boards indicate a stated minimal amount or commensurate amount to be raised each year as well as fundraising activity, either solicitation (direct, events, other) and/or prospecting (identifying, qualifying, initiating).

If introducing a give-or-get mandate for the first time and there is resistance from existing board members, consider a grandfather clause where current members start with a smaller initial amount to increase over the next few years, but new members are brought on at the expected level. Remember, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:21

Where Are They Hiding?

They aren't, but these prospective board members must be sought, educated, cultivated and asked. If the issue isn't inconsistent vetting of candidates but rather, finding any at all, that issue is worthy of investigation. Have your many audiences – donors, former staff, volunteers, community leaders, business leaders, local experts in useful fields – been considered? Is your organization sponsored by a religious order that also sponsors schools, or once did? Then put alumni/ae, current parents and past parents on the list.

Is transition planning underway or do you scramble when a replacement is necessary? Are some candidates being ignored? Are those who think outside the box and offer up never-before-tried ideas welcome and encouraged?

Is there anything about the current board that might turn others off – too old, too young, complainers vs zealous advocates? Is there a strong committee structure from which board members will emerge; a plan for cultivating future leadership?

Your board enlistment efforts need a strong value proposition and targeted marketing. Be ready to proactively address what prospective members may be thinking. Why should I join your board? Why is that the best use of my gifts and talents? Why now?

It is essential to demonstrate the impact of the board – in print, online, in person. Board member pride in the organization, those served, and fellow members, speaks volumes and attracts interest. Knowing that your board meetings truly engage the members' best ideas and insight, and end with each member feeling energized and hopeful, will appeal to those who really do want to share their talent and not just listen and nod.

Organization personnel need to recognize that although the staff/board relationship is a partnership, there is a need to continually cultivate this audience, like any other on our horizon. Astute board members, in turn, will demonstrate how much they value and support the administrative leadership.

Board Development

So, you know what you need and you've got them on board, figuratively and literally. Step one is orientation. Assume nothing, even if new board members have a prior relationship with your organization. Board orientation should have specific goals and objectives that ready each member for his/her role. You can, however, safely assume that if you give them a 100-page binder, they will not read it nor think they are responsible for the information it contains. Begin as you mean to go on – a dynamic, educational, inspiring session that makes them eager to take on the mantle of leadership and serve exceptionally well.

The key to ensuring board power is the ongoing training and formation you provide within your regular meetings and at the annual retreat.

Board meetings – held when they are needed, not merely to stick to a previously set schedule – have to engage your members' talents. That is the whole point. ANYTHING that can be shared in advance – committee meeting minutes, updates, etc., – should be sent prior to the meeting so that the majority of time together is substantive. "Before we leave this meeting, we need to finalize three options for our new location." "In light of the herculean job they have been doing, please come to this month's meeting, with two (or more!) ideas for how we, as a board, can support them in these challenging times."

Your meetings must not only run efficiently but also allow for participation via video conference. (How lucky are we that everyone and his brother is now comfortable with this option? Even a pandemic brings blessings...) However, you don't want 100% remote engagement. Boards with long-distance members will typically plan their annual board retreat to be all hands on deck, and scheduled at a time when other important organizational activities are underway. Include in your minimal expectations onsite participation in the retreat and surrounding events.

How To Hold a Terrible Board Meeting

Agenda

- I. Monotone welcome, introductions, opening prayer
- II. Verbal reports from each committee that could easily have been emailed
- III. No time allocation for agenda items
- IV. No questions posed or issues raised for discussion
- V. Total lack of participation
- VI. Insincere "anything else?" toward end of meeting
- VII. Closing prayer



Don't assume your board members are keeping track of how well they are fulfilling their expectations. Provide overall updates on total board performance at each meeting and individual progress reports (some organizations refer to these as board report cards) to thank them for their efforts and encourage further activity. "It was great to have 15 board members attend the volunteer appreciation event." "We have nine new members in our planned giving society and two of those are board members."

But it's not just about holding them accountable. Strong boards become more effective with time, training, gratitude and growing understanding of the importance of the mission and ministry of your organization, agency, program, etc.

Regardless of the area in which each board operates, the hope is that all members embrace the role of ambassador for your organization. Once again, don't assume they automatically know how to do this. Address the art and science of strategic conversations. Continually present mission moments that reveal your special and distinctive characteristics. Show them how to use casual encounters to promote your organization. Regularly share news about accomplishments while also illustrating how to spread the good word. Help them become the narrators of your story. If fundraising is a stated expectation, provide the training necessary to make it a comfortable and rewarding process.

Remind board members about the extraordinary impact your organization has on the lives of those you serve, the community and the world. You are improving lives, in some cases, saving lives. This is not the time to be modest! Tell the board so they can tell others.

Once a Year, Every Year

The annual board retreat – a key best practice in board formation, management and relationship building – is also an excellent opportunity to...

- re-engage the enthusiasm each member brought when joining;
- further educate them about the charism that guides the organization;
- remind them of the big picture and their role in it;
- recall with reverence not just who we are, but whose we are.

The retreat is a perfect time to take stock of the organization and the board: where we are, where we are going, how we will get there.

Blessings Abound

A strong board works for everyone – the organization and those you serve, the administration and staff, and the members themselves. Board leadership is a mission and ministry unto itself and one where everyone benefits.

For more information, watch our "Getting the Board You Want and Need" [webinar on demand](#). If you'd like to share this article with current or future board members, you can easily download it [here](#). ☀