

Let's Get on Board!

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"Let's nominate an attorney!" How 'bout an accountant?" "But we need more women...and perhaps a few Lilliputians, too?" "And let's not forget about folks with 'deep pockets' and people with influence. They probably won't attend many board meetings—or any—but that's OK. They're busy!"

Sound familiar? It Should. It's a conversation that all-too-often takes place each year, usually about a week or so before it's time to elect new board members. If you've ever experienced this not-so-imaginary dialogue, here are a few tips, tools and techniques to help recruit...and sustain...an A+ board.

1. Start a Governance Committee

Don't worry, I'm not suggesting that you add yet another committee to an already overburdened board. But I am suggesting that you take your pre-existing Nominating Committee and put it on steroids with several new responsibilities: find board superstars; create an in-depth orientation program; launch a mentoring program for first-year board members; periodically review the bylaws; and conduct the annual board assessment. In brief, the Governance Committee assumes responsibility, on behalf of the full board, to monitor each and every aspect of the board's work, and institutes a plan for the board's continuous improvement. Remember: the Governance Committee is considered by many board theorists to be THE most important committee of the board. Ensure that it gets the attention it deserves by placing your best board members—those who model exemplary board behavior—on this all important committee.

2. Nominate ONLY Superstars!

Alright...alright...I can hear the grumbling. You're probably thinking, "What exactly are 'superstars'...and how (and where) do we find them?" Well, first and foremost, "superstars" in this context are individuals who believe deeply and passionately about the agency's mission, or due to their prior track record of success, have a capacity to develop a deep and passionate commitment through service to the organization. Many governance thought-leaders recommend that *Passion-for-the-Mission* is a number one predictor of board member performance. But the definition of "superstar" doesn't end there. It's also a person who might score well on tests for emotional intelligence and demonstrates several of the qualities usually associated with effective leadership including: patience, optimism, wisdom, high integrity, caring, selflessness, altruism, and playing nicely with others. In fact, you may want to lead your board members through an exercise, during a board meeting, in which they generate their own list of leadership attributes. To summarize, terrific board members are more often measured by *attitude* than *aptitude* (or, for that matter, wealth or alleged influence)!

3. But What About Skills?

Ahh...glad you asked. The Paleolithic Era of board recruitment placed a heavy emphasis on professional skill-sets, under the assumption that a key attribute of exceptional boards was an abundance of professional expertise. (There may also have been a desire to obtain a pool of free professional advice for the agency!) Hence, Nominating Committees during this period used what some called the Noah's Arc theory of recruitment: two attorneys, two accountants, two entrepreneurs, etc. This sometimes led to highly skilled, but dysfunctional boards, since a.) board members felt they were recruited expressly for their expertise (as opposed to their leadership), and b.) board members may have exhibited problem-child behaviors (e.g. 'lone wolves,' arrogant, negative, excessively controlling or lacking in follow-through). If you must recruit individuals on the basis of their highly developed professional skills,

consider forming an Advisory Council, composed of those (for example) with legal and financial expertise, as well as people of influence; they can be counted upon to share their expertise and/or influence when needed. In other words, make certain that LEADERSHIP remains a sine qua non criterion for board membership.

4. Cast a Wide Net!

Governance Committees may have to meet monthly to effectively discharge their duties. And that's because the task of locating and recruiting prospects, especially those that fall into the superstar range, takes TIME...LOTS OF IT. Excellent Governance Committees give themselves 10 months or more, prior to the annual election, to forecast the coming membership needs of the board, and then identify and recruit the best-of-the-best. Identification techniques include PR releases in community newspapers, as well as conversations with members of other community-based organizations (e.g. Kiwanis, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, etc.). Ideas for identifying outstanding prospects can be gleaned through brainstorming during the board meeting. Your current board members often are your BEST source of ideas about identifying and recruiting GREAT new members,

5. Consider the Timetable

Regularly overlooked in the recruitment process is the recruitment timetable, and more specifically, the ways in which the recruitment calendar complements the overall board calendar. For example, I sometimes recommend that boards:

- Begin board (and officer) terms coincidentally with the beginning of each new fiscal year.
- Allow a period of 1-2 months between the annual election and the beginning of a board term, specifically to allow for a comprehensive orientation period.
- Hold the annual board/staff retreat late in the calendar/fiscal year, and invite your board member prospects to attend as guests.

6. Want to Learn More?

The purpose of this article was to introduce time-tested techniques for board building. But there's more...much more to the art and science of recruiting a peak-performing board. To conclude our short romp through the tenets of board recruitment, here are a few exceptional resources to share with your new (and improved) Governance Committee

Board Recruitment and Orientation 3rd Edition

By Hildy Gottlieb

Published by Renaissance Press

The Board Building Cycle, 2nd Edition

By Berit M. Lakey

Published by BoardSource

Questions about this article-or about any aspect of peak-performing boards are welcomed: michael@boardsmto.com