

19th Century Boards Operating in a 21st Century World

Follow these four steps to build your board of the future.

BY DAVID NEIDERT

Another budget tabled, one more meeting with no quorum, more missed opportunities to move the organization forward. These frustrations face countless nonprofit organizations across the country.

For too long, nonprofits have used the for-profit board model. The 19th century board which meets to approve finances, set policy, and give a nod to programming—all in one hour or less—is outdated. For organizations to compete in the 21st century, their boards must be dynamic, passionate, and intimately involved in the workings of their nonprofits.

Four Steps to a 21st Century Board

To create boards strong and agile enough to navigate today's rough seas, follow these steps:

1

Have Your Board Evaluate Itself.

A strong board requires honest self-evaluation.¹ First, the board needs to ask itself how well it has developed the following areas of the organization:

- mission
- programming
- financial structure
- intraboard relationships.

It is critical to understand how board members have contributed to the advancement or mediocrity of these elements.

After candidly reviewing its collective performance, the board needs to review each individual's contributions. Does the board member:

- attend board meetings regularly?
- participate enthusiastically in fundraising?
- attend organizational functions?
- make personal financial contributions to the organization?
- serve actively on committees?
- act as a community ambassador for the organization?

Answering these questions will reveal a great deal about a board member's commitment.² Measuring individuals against these criteria will strengthen the board. As author and lecturer, Michael LeBoeuf, observes, "What gets measured, gets done."

2

Cultivate Your Board through Expectations.

The second step is to let board members know what you expect. It's crucial to plant the proper expectations

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in board members' minds from the beginning. There are two key ways to do so:

Create Board Job Descriptions.

A board member's job description is an important tool for sharing expectations, especially for officers. Just as boards provide position descriptions for their executive directors, so they should have a description of duties for themselves.

Job descriptions serve two important functions. First, they create an outline for accountability in specific areas. Second, they help insure consistency from year to year.

Provide Willingness-to-Serve Forms.

All board members should sign a form stating their willingness to serve. This form should explain what you require of the board, including:

- attendance requirements
- personal financial commitments
- participation in fundraising activities
- participation in scheduled events.

Each board member should sign this form *before* accepting a position

with the board. Such a form will serve as a valuable reminder of board members' agreement to serve.³

3

Prepare for the Future through Nominations.

The next step is to identify new board members who are qualified, motivated, and dependable. You need to look for people who, as Alice Gore King puts it, "are interested in the organization's subject and purpose, agree with its principles, and believe in its programs."⁴

To find such people, you must think of nominations as a year-round process. Look for new board members not once a year but every month.

It's also a good idea to hold an orientation meeting for prospective board members. At this meeting, explain your mission and your expectations of the board. The value of such a meeting is twofold. It assures a consistent message to potential board members. And it weeds out those who are not cut out for your board. How much better to find organizational fit now, rather than next year when the board member is exhibiting tentative enthusiasm and lackluster commitment.⁵

Finally, make sure nominees come from a diverse background. Too often, boards are homogeneous, producing thinking which may not be in the best interest of the organization or those it serves. Establishing diversity must be a deliberate part of building a board. Through diversity, coupled with collaboration, you can create invaluable linkages with your community.⁶

4

Fire Them Up or Fire Them.

You've often heard the adage that you cannot fire volunteers. Ultimately, however, you must ask if all board members are actively contributing. If they're not, you must either fire them or ask them to recommit themselves.

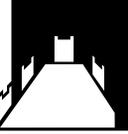
You can "fire" board members by finding other roles for them. Perhaps they can serve on a task force or committee. Or they can host a special event, spearhead a fundraising campaign, or volunteer in the organization's programs. Thus, they can still serve the organization without weakening the board.

With humanity, civility, and professionalism, you *can* fire volunteers. Indeed, you must do so if they aren't participating enthusiastically. Cultivating a strong board requires pruning as well as nurturing.

Time to Face the New Millennium

As Alice Gore King observes, "Having an effective board may not be easy, but it *is* simple."⁷ When boards

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candidly evaluate themselves and strengthen their commitments, the 19th century board will *leap* into the 21st century, leading to new heights in a new millennium. ■

Footnotes

¹See “How Effective Is Your Board? A Rating Scale,” “Board Self-Assessment: The First Step to Effective Planning,” and “Effective Board Performance: 99 Compelling Questions” in *Board Leadership and Governance, Leadership Series*, available from the Society’s *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or call 800-424-7367.

²For advice on strengthening these areas, see, for example, “Fundraising with Your Board: Making It Work,” *Nonprofit World*, September–October 1995, “Planning: What Every Board Member Should Know,” *Nonprofit World*, May–June 1993, and “Rule Requires Board Members to Be Expert Investors,” *Nonprofit World*, January–February 1996.

³See “Why You Need a Prenuptial Agreement: Advice to the President and Executive Director,” *Nonprofit World*, January–February 1995.

⁴“How to Create an Effective Board,” *Nonprofit World*, March–April 1994, p. 12.

⁵For more on board nomination and orientation, see “Building a Committed Board,” “Put Some Life into Your Board,” and “Learning the Ropes: Orienting New Members” in *Board Leadership and Governance, Leadership Series* (see footnote 1).

⁶See “Meeting the Challenge of Diversity,” *Nonprofit World*, July–August 1992.

⁷*Nonprofit World*, March–April 1994, p. 14.