

Eight Questions Every Board Needs to Answer

Anticipating the questions of prospective board members is vital to successful recruitment.

BY BEAUFORT B. LONGEST, JR.

One key to recruiting new board members is anticipating their questions—and having good answers in hand. Although questions will vary, they will cluster around certain themes. You can anticipate the questions prospects will raise and prepare comprehensive answers ahead of time. Even better, answer these questions *before* prospects pose them. Here are the main questions savvy board prospects will have, along with ways to respond:

Question 1: What is your mission? Is it one I can wholeheartedly support? How focused is your board on this mission? To what extent is this mission being accomplished?

How to Answer: Give board prospects written materials that explain your mission, the board's commitment to it, and your success in fulfilling it. While brochures can be useful, it's best to also provide objective documentation of how well your organization fulfills its mission. If your organization goes through an accreditation process, provide prospective members with the latest report. Typically, these reports describe an organization's successes, as well as areas where improvement is needed. Prospects can judge the relative mix of these and get a sense of how things are going in your organization's core activities.

Answer prospects' questions *before* they pose them.

Also provide prospects with the organization's latest audited financial statements. Share the results of internal audits conducted in the past few years and those planned for next year. If there has been a recent fundraising campaign, summarize its goals and outcomes or ongoing performance. If you have sought a grant—whether it's been awarded or not—share the proposal with prospects.

Question 2: Does your board have the *conceptual capacity* to understand the context in which the organization operates?

How to Answer: Offer material describing interrelationships within your organization as well as relationships with outside organizations and individuals. Explain your organizational culture, values, and beliefs. Articulate your organization's vision for the future. Describe how you interact with stakeholders.

Question 3: What is the depth of your board's *ethical and legal knowledge*? Can the board fulfill its obligations of

compliance, fiduciary duty, and ethically sound decision-making?

How to Answer: Show that you follow all necessary laws and regulations, complying with the spirit as well as the letter of the law. Specify how your board approaches the following legally established duties:

- **Duty of Due Care** (making judgments and decisions in good faith)
- **Duty of Loyalty** (making sure the organization's assets don't unfairly accrue to individuals' personal gain)
- **Duty of Obedience to Charitable Purpose** (making decisions consistent with the public purposes set forth in the organization's articles of incorporation).

Describe your compliance programs and any recent or pending legal actions in which your organization is involved. Emphasize that your board is committed to ethical behavior. Explain how your board considers ethics in its decisions. If you haven't conducted an ethical audit, do so, and share the results with board prospects (see Allen in "Resources").

Question 4: Does your board possess the *technical knowledge* necessary to govern effectively?

How to Answer: Explain how your board assures itself that it has the knowledge necessary to conduct its work. Describe ongoing board development programs. Specify people on your board



who possess financial, analytical, and other key skills. Make it clear that you offer training when needed to enhance board members' technical knowledge.

Question 5: What is your board's *collaborative capacity*?

How to Answer: Share evaluations from every collaboration in which your organization has been involved. Highlight any agreements and contracts between your organization and other parties. Demonstrate that your board can achieve the inter-organizational relationships and alliances so necessary for successful performance.

Question 6: How *politically astute* is your board?

How to Answer: Provide evidence of your organization's influence in the public policymaking process. Show that

your board assesses the impacts of laws and regulations on the organization, prepares for these impacts, and works to influence legislation on the organization's behalf.

Question 7: Is your board's *commercial capability* sufficient to ensure your organization's success?

How to Answer: Document your board's involvement in such business-related activities as these:

- **public relations** and communications
- **information dissemination** to customers and potential customers, as well as their families, and other stakeholders
- **donor development** and relationship building
- **program changes** made in response to market demands.

Question 8: How effective is your board *as an entity*?

How to Answer: Provide information on your board's demographic balance. Document the background, education, and qualifications of current board members. Show that your board possesses adequate clusters of conceptual, ethical, legal, technical, collaborative, political, and commercial capabilities to fulfill its governance obligations. ■

Resources

Allen, Michael, "The Ethics Audit: A Tool Whose Time Has Come," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 6.

Brudney, Jeffrey & Vic Murray, "Improving Nonprofit Boards: What Works & What Doesn't?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 3.

Houle, Cyril, "How Effective Is Your Board? A Rating Scale," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Board Leadership & Governance, Leadership Series*.

Weisman, Carol, *Board Governance Videotape*.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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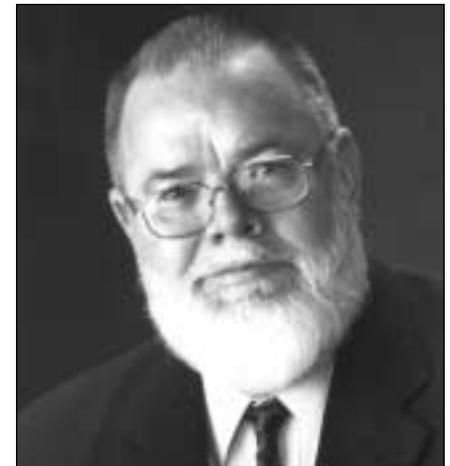
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