

# Success through Engaged High-Level Board Members

Learn the details of this signpost for success.



By Bill Hoffman

**H**ere's a healthy exercise for any nonprofit. Ask this question: Are all board members truly engaged in the organization's work?

For most organizations, the answer to this question will be “yes” and “no.” The organization is doing well if half the board members are fully engaged; but what about the other half?

Every organization in your community wants the same strong board members who can get things done. To be “the” go-to nonprofit requires being strategic in how you engage board members.

## Are the Right People on Board?

Identifying “dream” board members can be like picking a fantasy sports team – satisfying in a theoretical sense but unrealistic to implement. Building an actual board with the right members is a huge challenge, as it may or may not include those dream board members. Taking the sports analogy one step further, an effective board is like a winning team in that it's more than the sum of the players; it's about team performance.

Putting together a highly effective board requires looking strategically at the pieces to be put into place. When current board members recommend candidates, they tend to identify friends and colleagues within their immediate network. The resulting loss of diversity makes it difficult to reach out to all constituencies. Board diversity goes beyond gender and race. A truly diverse board has representation from a variety of generations, geographic areas, expertise (such as business, community leaders, private foundations, legal, and marketing) and interest in engagement (hands-on board members as well as those who can open doors and make introductions at various levels in the community).

## Create a Clear Path to Engagement.

It's self-evident – to staff – how the board can best help. It's less obvious to board members.

The best board members are busy people who are used to rolling up their sleeves and getting things done quickly. If they don't know the “lay of the land” of an organization, they won't know how best to invest their efforts. Give board members a thorough orientation to the organization including some history, who the players are (staff and board), what the committees do, and where the greatest needs are (be they in expertise or resources). Lay that groundwork before asking new board members how they see themselves helping.

After the orientation, continue to make it easy for board members to be involved. Do they have access to the information they need to gauge the progress of their efforts? Providing this information may mean giving regular updates on the goals the board has set for itself. Everyone wants to see how they're doing, so make sure they see the results – even if those results aren't all rosy. Access to such data will help board members make course corrections if their efforts aren't effective.

Find opportunities to engage board members. Advertise these opportunities regularly in board meetings and other communications with board members. There should be a variety of options – not everyone wants to serve on the gala or fundraising committee. Are there sectors of the community you want to connect with more fully? Providing such connections is a great way for board members to help.

## Work Them!

At times it may seem counter-intuitive, but the best way to keep the busiest, most valuable board members is to work them hard! Yes, these are busy people, and, yes, they have a lot going on in their lives. But if they don't see the role they play as critical to a nonprofit's success, they'll drift away to where they can have an impact. The best board members want to use their talents to make a difference, and it's incumbent on staff to determine the best way to do that.

Don't confuse attending meetings with engagement. Just because someone can't make all the board or committee meetings doesn't mean they can't be effective. Many highly effective board members would rather work behind the scenes or on a more individual basis. Are they available between meetings? Often board members who aren't “meeting goers” are those who can make one phone call and remove a lot of roadblocks. Or they can make inroads that help the organization – regardless of their meeting attendance. Be sure to share and celebrate these successes as examples of ways that board members can be of assistance. Such celebrations will deepen the interest, activity, and engagement of your entire board. **S**

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