

What's Most Important in a Board Member?

When recruiting board members, what should you look for first?

By Karen Eber Davis

You're looking for new board members. Which of the following represents the top feature to pursue?

- a. candidates with high-net-worth who can make large donations
- b. individuals who know lots of people and who will make lots of introductions
- c. people who work well with others
- d. something else.

The Answer

The answer is d. While it's desirable for board members to have means, great connections, and people skills, what you need most is something else. What you need is someone who can think strategically.

Why are strategic thinkers so valuable on boards? Here are a few of the reasons:

They're skilled at shifting perspectives. They can imagine everything from putting their hand in the Colorado River to standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon – and all the ledges in between. This perspective-shifting ability allows them to see benefits, challenges, and the consequences of various choices.

They'll help you grapple with critical questions, make thoughtful policies, and uncover new options for moving forward with an analytical eye.

The Crucial Behaviors

How can you tell if a board prospect thinks in this useful manner? Look for the way they respond in your interviews with them. Strategic thinkers are able to do the following:

Offer a historical viewpoint. For example, when someone mentions a hot political issue, the nominee notes how the country once dealt with a similar challenge.

Ask questions that uncover the method behind results. For instance, your organization's abuzz with the news that the local symphony raised \$250,000 with its special event. Instead of being dazzled by the outcome, your candidate's curious: How did the symphony do it? How many years have they had this special event? How did they do it two years ago? What are they doing differently now?



Extract themes or through-lines in discussions. Your prospect summarizes the main points of a discussion by commenting, “We seem to come back to three issues: money, staff, and the need for a new roof.”

Ask perplexing questions that upon reflection seem obvious. “Long term, what will be the impact on our brand if we accept a sponsorship from the casino?”

Imagine themselves in other's shoes. After Florence, Irma, or Michael, they ask, “What would happen if a similar storm struck our area?”

Your ideal board candidate will have means, great contacts, outstanding team skills, and the ability to think strategically. However, if your candidates have only some of these characteristics, prioritize people who think big picture and long term. Always look first for the strategic thinker. 

Karen Eber Davis (karen@kedconsult.com) is an expert in maximizing philanthropic impact. She is the author of 7 Nonprofit Income Streams: Open the Floodgates to Sustainability! and Let's Raise Nonprofit Millions Together. Sign up for her free newsletter "Added Value" at kedconsult.com.

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