

# Building a Board with a Passion for Mission

*Here's how to recruit the board of your dreams.*

BY CAROL WEISMAN

**F**inding the ideal board—full of people who are passionate about your cause—can mean the difference between life and death for your organization. In some cases, you may think passion doesn't matter. If Mr. Big Bucks has accepted your board nomination, and is only passionate about writing one huge check per year, that may be enough. But most of the time, it's not.

Passion doesn't necessarily require your board members to live and breathe your cause. If they do, that's great. But a more attainable goal is getting a boardroom full of people who are passionate about sharing their gifts on behalf of your mission. In other words, whatever your board members bring to the party—whether it's connections in high places, deep pockets, or an amazing ability to tell your story to an audience—they are inspired to share those strengths.

So, where does the passion come from? It starts with the board recruitment process. Here are some things you can do, from the beginning, to create a committed board:

### Know Thy Mission, Know Thy Direction

It's hard to have the foundation for a passionate board unless you know where you are and where you need to be as an organization. Before you do anything else, answer one important question: What exactly is your mission?

Unfortunately, the nonprofit's mission rarely gets the time and attention it deserves. Why? Because we don't think of our groups as businesses. Granted, we aren't in business to make a profit. But we are in business to make money for the causes we support.

What's more, as we grow in size or scope, our mission changes. We have to realize that our mission is a living, breath-

ing goal. If we don't revisit it, we may lose sight of our direction. And if we go into the recruiting process with blinders on, our board doesn't stand a chance.

### Assess Your Board

Once you have reviewed your mission, take a close look at your board. How diverse is it?

Diversity is not about being socially correct. Diversity on your board simply makes sense because it's profitable. And remember, you are running a business.

Diversity is broader than race and gender. Think about it: If you have black, white, and Hispanic people on your board, and they all grew up in middle-class America, went to Ivy League schools, and work for Fortune 100 companies, you may not have as much diversity as you would think.

For diversity to work, you must be willing to trust people who are different from you and value their points of view. If you don't, you can all but kill any passion those board members have.

### Find the Winners

To pinpoint the best candidates for your board, remind yourself that you're running a business. It wouldn't be effective to hire an employee without a well-planned recruiting effort based on the mission of your organization. The same is true when choosing board members.



Here are 10 places to start recruiting:

### 1. Your current board.

Begin by asking your board members: Who would you like on the board if you could choose anyone at all? Have board members make lists of candidates and submit their lists to you. Then distribute a master list to everyone.

### 2. Board banks.

They're like dating bureaus for nonprofit boards. Some United Way offices have them. Sometimes it's the Junior League. And some leadership programs—such as Leadership Miami, Leadership New York, or Leadership Philadelphia—have board banks. When you find people through a board bank, you know they've filled out a form listing their skills, interests, and the type of board they want to serve on. So, you know they have passion for your cause.

### 3. Community organizations.

Check with groups like the Lions, Kiwanis, or Rotary. Tell them what you need, and you'll find they're reliable in coming through for you.

### 4. Clergy.

If you want more Jewish board members, go to a local rabbi. If you're looking for African Americans, go to the minister of an African American congregation. The same goes for every religion and every type of board member. The clergy are marvelous in helping recruit.

### 5. Major donors.

Keep an eye on who's giving and how much. Many people who are giving money to your organization are delighted to give time and expertise, too.

### 6. Local companies.

When you solicit funds from corporations, take the opportunity to solicit for board members as well. For instance, ask if there's someone in the marketing department who might be interested in board service.

### 7. Real estate professionals.

If you're looking for high-profile board members, you want to connect with someone who is selling expensive real estate to influential people. That way, you can reach people when they first move to town and are eager to get involved in the community.

### 8. Newspapers.

Look for movers and shakers in the news. Call and ask if they'll have coffee with you. If you can invite them to an event in your organization, do it.

### 9. Under your nose.

You don't need to look far to find good board members. If you hold site visits of your facilities, get the names of people who tour your site; they're already showing interest in

your group. The same goes for committee members who work with you.

### 10. The bottom line.

Don't discount any resources. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, be on the lookout for prospects.

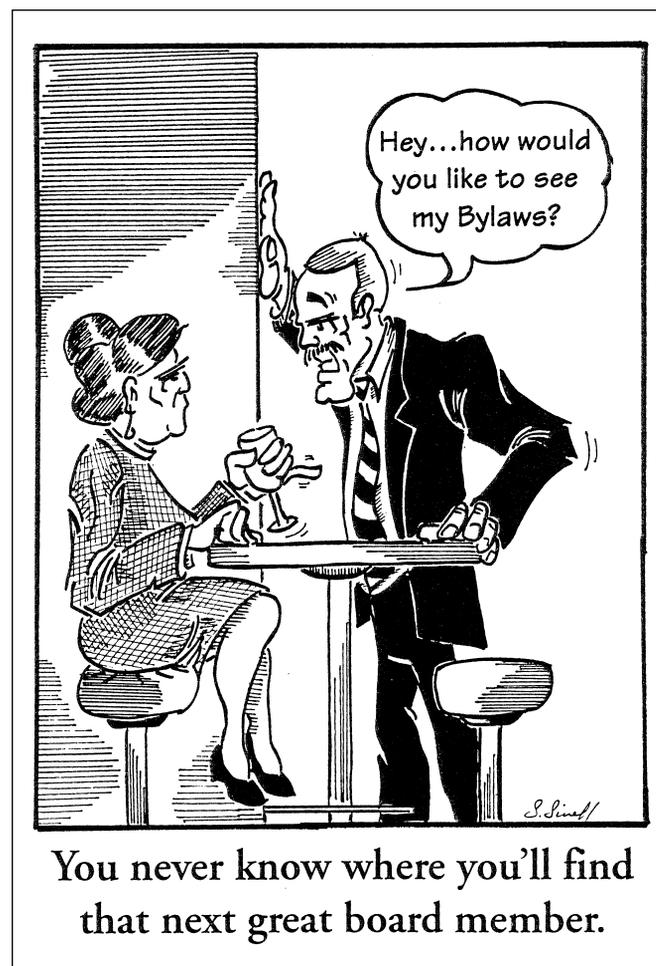
## Meet with Candidates

After finding potential board members, let them know you'd like them on your board, and ask to meet with them. Let them choose the time and place of the meeting.

Don't haul too much "stuff" to the meeting. Bring only brief, relevant information that will give the candidate a better understanding of your mission. In other words, no three-inch binders allowed!

Ask the hard questions. The more you communicate up front, the better. That means asking candid questions to encourage honest answers.

Clarify what you expect of them as board members—and what they expect of you. Answer this crucial question: "What's in it for me?" Be very clear on why it's important to join your board.



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*No three-inch binders allowed!*

Always send a prompt thank-you note after the meeting. In your note, outline why your group would be a good fit for your prospective board member.

## Secure Their Commitment

The time for new board members to learn what constitutes a “good job” isn’t when they’re already sitting in the boardroom. That’s why—once the board has voted in new members and they’ve verbally agreed to board service—you should cement their commitment with a formal letter. At a minimum, your letter should include the following:

- **Financial obligations.** People are much more comfortable with guidelines. For example, you could explain that the board member will be responsible for donating \$500 or securing at least two corporate donations.
- **Meeting attendance.** Mention the times, dates, and places of upcoming meetings. Note the percentage of attendance expected—for instance, a member in good standing must attend at least 60% of the meetings.
- **Committee participation.** Be clear about what’s expected and what’s allowed. For example, if you join the board of a small community ballet company, you’re going to be asked to take tickets, sew costumes, and paint scenery. If you join the board of the New York City Ballet Company, however, you’re not permitted to sew costumes or paint scenery.
- **Special-event expectations.** Mention things like selling a table for the dinner dance, bringing a foursome to the golf tournament, or anything else that will be required of the board member.
- **Board orientation information.** Explain when orientation will take place and what board members should read beforehand to be ready.

Send board members two copies of the letter. Have them sign both copies and return one to you. If the letter is slow in returning, call to see if the person is having second thoughts. If so, now is the time to know.

## Keep the Momentum Going

Board orientation is a vital part of the process. The idea of orientation is to help new board members understand why they’re in the room and what their board membership means. They learn how to tell the story and, best of all, they create their own story and take ownership of your cause. That’s what orientation is really all about. Here are ways to make the most of orientation:

**Try a board retreat.** For some groups, a board retreat will be an inexpensive, four-hour session in a church basement. Larger organizations with bigger missions may bring a facilitator to an out-of-town site for two or three days. No matter what the format, the retreat will link new people to your cause, introduce them to others on the board, and show them what board membership is all about.

**Make a site visit.** Say you’re with an environmental group. You could pile your new board members in a van and take them to see how an organic garden works. You could talk about your bylaws on the way.

**Match mentors.** Mentors are a great way to orient new board members. Pair each new person with a seasoned board member, who can answer questions, explain how decisions are made, introduce the players, and act as companion and personal resource.

**Have fun.** Whatever you choose for your orientation, make it fun. When people are expected to just sit and listen rather than interact, they won’t learn as much, and enthusiasm can become defused in boredom.

## Make It Win-Win

Every contact with a prospective board member has to be win-win from the very beginning. Anything you can do to inspire candidates improves your chance to have the board of your dreams.

And remember, while your new board members have tremendous gifts to give, they also have a lot to gain by serving in your organization. Not only do you offer recognition, status, contacts, and power, you offer the priceless opportunity to support a cause you both value. And while you are running a business, it’s the mission that really counts. That’s where the passion lives. ■

### Resources

- Houle, Cyril, “How Effective Is Your Board? A Rating Scale,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 5.
- Houle, Cyril, “Who Should Be on Your Board?,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 8, No. 1.
- Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Board Leadership & Governance, Leadership Series*.
- Vogt, Jean, “Demystifying the Mission Statement,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 1.
- Weisman, Carol, *Board Governance Videotape*.
- Weisman, Carol, “Building Your Nonprofit Dream Team,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 5.

These resources are available from the Society’s Resource Center, 734-451-3582, [www.snpo.org](http://www.snpo.org).

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