



Defining Your Board's Needs



Here's what you need to know before seeking that next board member.

Board recruitment involves two elements — an organization and a board candidate.

The focus starts with the organization's needs. These needs dictate the parameters of the search. As you begin the recruitment process, keep these three vital concepts in mind:

- **The board is a strategic partner** in an organization's governance. Board members aren't just names on a letterhead or writers of checks; they're valuable partners.

- **In this partnership, the board serves as a "brain trust"** for the organization, with each member providing expertise in two important ways:

- informing the board's policy formation process
- serving as a resource for senior staff as they implement the organization's mission.

- **Finding board members with the skills to be "brain trust" partners** requires a planned search, custom-tailored to the organization's needs.

Choose board members with the same attention to their roles as when you hire staff. For example, you wouldn't hire a development director or chief financial officer

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without a job description and a clear understanding of responsibilities. Use the same criteria in seeking board members.

At a recent board-connector meeting (for more on such meetings, see "Looking for the Perfect Board Member?" on page 16), representatives from a medical-training institute arrived with the request to find "someone wealthy/important" for their board. After a discussion with an advisor, they realized that their real need was to add board members with expertise in finance and strategic planning to help develop financial plans. This, of course, didn't preclude their also being wealthy and important.

Six Key Things You Need To Know

Introducing a candidate to a board is like bringing an outsider into the family circle; the more you understand about the "board family," the greater your chances

of finding the right fit. Take the time to create an organizational profile—an overall portrait of what the organization and its board look like. Here are six categories of information to include in your profile:

1. Mission: What Is This Organization All About?

Nonprofits address an amazing variety of needs and goals. Even nonprofits in the same general field can have very different goals. Within the field of music, for instance, the spectrum is vast — from a barbershop quartet to a chamber orchestra renowned for its interpretation of 18th century compositions. Dance organizations run the gamut from tap troupes to classical ballet companies.

Because board members make a personal commitment, it's important that the organization's mission interest the candidate. While some people will be glad to help "any organization that serves kids," others have more targeted concerns.

Example: One prospective trustee expressed a preference for environmental issues. He had declined a nature-preserve board, but when he was approached by an organization concerned with developing

green spaces within the city, he said, “That’s for me. I’m really concerned that kids who grow up in the city have a chance to play and learn where there are trees and grass, and not just concrete.”

2. Size & Stage of Life Cycle

How big is the organization, and what is its stage of growth? Is it a toddler just emerging from its founding stage? An organization going through a difficult adolescence? Or a *grande dame* too fragile to handle abrupt change? Organizations that reach a mature stage may require people with the skill to function in a well-defined structure — and the patience to wait for the right moment to have an impact on organizational direction and policy.

Example: The board of a major health organization was populated by the descendants (and two original members) of prominent, wealthy founding families. They knew they needed to bring in new blood from the corporate world, but there was a feeling of unease about these newcomers fitting into a “blue blood” environment. A board recruiter was able to identify a senior corporate executive whose human resources experience gave her the diplomatic skills to fit in gracefully.

3. History & Demographics

History plays an important role in shaping an organization’s culture. The factors that led to its founding — a battle to save a playground, a response to an emergency, sorrow over a child’s death to a rare disease — shape institutional memory and create the atmosphere that will confront a new board member.

Other things affecting recruitment strategy are demographics: an organization’s location, ethnic background of people served, and board members’ ages. Many boards are composed solely of one profession, such as social workers in senior care, college admissions officers, or artists. Many seek to

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broaden their boards, but care is needed to find the right person to fit into an environment where the others “speak a different language” — the jargon of the field.

4. Current Board & Staff Leadership

What is the board’s skill profile? Are all board members active? Only a few? Mostly deadwood? Are they founders? Been there forever? Mostly newcomers? Is the chair weak? Overly dominant? A good leader? Do board members also serve as volunteers involved with day-to-day operations — or is the chair frustrated because board members rarely show up?

Perhaps the most crucial dynamics are the CEO’s personality and management style. Some see their board as a cheering squad; others regard their trustees as banks; some are intimidated by their boards. Those who view their board members as valued partners reap the richest rewards.

5. Governance Practices

Pinpoint your expectations for board members by answering questions such as the following:

When and where does the board meet? The pattern can vary from monthly, 90-minute meetings to semi-annual get-togethers lasting days. Meetings can take place in the organization’s basement offices or (for a national organization) in hotel meeting rooms at sites throughout the country. Most people prefer to serve on boards that are conveniently located, but you may be surprised. A prominent banker was very ready to travel an hour to attend meetings of a community-service agency in a remote neighborhood; an insurance executive didn’t blink an eye when asked to come to a committee meeting at 7:30 in the morning — a 75-minute trip from his home.

What board committees exist?

What are their work agendas? Are these committees active? When, where, and how often do they meet? Committees offer an important channel for board-member participation, and you need to have a realistic assessment of how they’re functioning — or not functioning. Examining each committee’s mandate provides an understanding of the “brains” that would be valuable for the committee’s agenda. This becomes the basis for the ideal roster of board skills.

How long are the terms of board service, and how often do people rotate on and off the board? Answers to these questions not only define the length of the candidate’s potential commitment; they also affect how long everyone else has been on the board — and this can have a strong impact on the board’s personality. Is there a rotation provision in the bylaws, and is it used? Or is everyone automatically re-elected? A board with little turnover can become a closed group with strong resistance to newcomers.

6. Financial Contributions

Most organizations look to their boards for financial support and fundraising assistance. It’s important to get fundraising expectations on the table from the beginning:

- **Is a personal cash contribution expected,** and if so, in what amount?
- **Is a gift from a board member’s company expected?**
- **Will the board member’s assistance in “getting” funds from others be credited toward their “giving” requirement?**
- **Do *pro bono* services** (such as in-kind resources or volunteer labor) count as a respected alternative to a cash donation?

Sometimes a board wants to specify a financial requirement for new members. Too often this is wishful thinking. Expectations for new members should be in line with the current board’s giving practices.

Example 1: A classic case was a board that was reaching out for

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Looking for the Perfect Board Member?

If so, boardnetUSA is the place for you. The Volunteer Consulting Group — a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in New York City with over 30 years' experience strengthening nonprofits — created boardnetUSA to help nonprofit boards reach beyond their existing networks to find people interested in serving as board members.

There's no fee for a board or individual to use the boardnetUSA system. This unique system is a network of communities working locally to enhance nonprofit board governance. Each local community partner develops its own services tailored to its community.

In Ann Arbor, Michigan, for example, Nonprofit Enterprise at Work (NEW) is boardnetUSA's community partner. NEW has developed a program it calls BoardConnect, which provides board matching, on-site training, and other board development services. Nonprofits seeking new board members can send representatives to board-connector meetings, where board-matching experts will help them decide exactly what sort of candidate they most need on their board. Then boardnetUSA's online database system will match the organization with the ideal person. In addition, BoardConnect offers skills-training workshops, Web site training, a reference library, and office and meeting space for nonprofits.

In New York City, Bernard "Bernie" Adams learned about boardnet USA when he told a friend he was interested in doing some public service. His friend suggested boardnet, "because I could post all my credentials and interests online, and boards looking for members did the screening," Adams explains. "It really reduced the time and cost of the search for me. I was approached by a number of organizations by e-mail and was able to follow up and learn about their missions and then proceed by telephone before going further. It's a very efficient way to do what I guess a dating service does."

Adams ended up on the board of Harlem Link Charter School and is "incredibly happy" there. "My profile was helpful to them, because they were looking for someone with my background in administration and finance. I've been involved in helping businesses grow for most of my career both as a consultant and manager, so I was looking for a start-up organization that could benefit from my skill set," says Adams, who is founding partner of New York's ARX Investment Management, LP. Harlem Link was a great fit for him.

"Significantly, we continue to use boardnet's services at Harlem Link," adds Adams. "We're looking for additional directors, so we keep our posting active as a way of finding people who might be outside our universe. Clearly, boardnet provides a unique service, and I can't say enough about it in terms of its quality and benefits to the nonprofit world."

In the words of another boardnet user, "I found the perfect match for my interest. After attending two board meetings as an observer and their initial strategic planning meeting, I was elected to the board. I found boardnetUSA to be a great help for several reasons, but it was the profile that made me focus on what I wanted."

Over 12,000 candidates and nonprofit boards are currently using boardnetUSA. Over 85% of users feel boardnetUSA connected them with a board or candidate they wouldn't have otherwise encountered, and 88% would use boardnetUSA again.

To find the ideal person for your board, visit www.boardnetusa.org. If you don't find any candidates listed in your geographic vicinity, it's probably because no community partner has yet been identified in your area. Perhaps you can help develop such a partnership in your region.

its first member in the business community. The present board members didn't make any financial contributions, but they thought it would be "nice" if the new member, since he was a businessman, would give \$50,000 a year.

Example 2: A fledgling drama group set a minimum giving requirement of \$5,000 per year for each board member after the executive director attended a meeting and heard that board members of another theater group were contributing at that level. The difference was that the latter group was a well-known theatrical company with a distinguished performance record. It had "grown up" to a giving level that was unrealistic for this new company.

Many boards do require a donation from every member because it can be important in fundraising proposals to say that there's 100% support from the board. Again, knowing what's expected is the key to success. As one thoughtful trustee said when he turned down one board and accepted another, "I am always striving in my job; in my volunteer work I want to be with an organization at my comfort level, where my efforts and contributions are welcome and appreciated. I don't want to feel that I'm not 'keeping up' with the rest." ■

To Learn More

For more on recruiting board members, see these resources at www.snpo.org:

- How to Develop a High-Impact Board (Vol. 24, No. 4)
- Bring a List of Names to the Next Meeting (Vol. 24, No. 5)
- Is There a Role for Your Board in Raising Funds? (Vol. 23, No. 3)
- Building Your Nonprofit Dream Team (Vol. 14, No. 5)
- Improving Board Meetings: Three Steps to Success (Vol. 24, No. 6)
- Learning Institute Board Governance online program.