



# How to Create a Board that Gets Things Done

Is your board the best it could be? Here are ways to assure productivity.

By Corwin P. King

Typically, there are four overlapping reasons to create a nonprofit board: to satisfy legal requirements, to add legitimacy to the organization, to provide community input to the organization's decisions, and to promote community involvement in the organization's activities. To create an effective board, you first need to decide which of these functions is most important—or if all are equally important—to your organization. Only with a clear understanding of your board's main functions can you effectively choose, recruit, and motivate board members.

## WHO SHOULD BE ON THE BOARD?

With the board's chief functions in mind, there are four obvious types of people to recruit as board members: people who are interested in the organization's mission, people who are knowledgeable about the organization's mission, people with "standing" in the community, and people who are representative of the community.

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People already familiar with the organization are natural choices. Past customers, clients, or contributors are good sources, as are board members of other organizations. (But beware of "board pollution,"

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selecting the same old people with the same old ideas.)

In some cases, people's prominence is important, since "names" tend to beget "names" for fundraising and membership purposes. If the board should reflect its constituents (as in a service agency, for example), getting people from various racial, social, and economic backgrounds may be important to provide community balance.

Essential questions to ask are: Who has the time, talent, and temperament to serve? Are candidates able to contribute to the board, attend board meetings, and perform board duties? Do they have abilities (financial, artistic, creative, and so on) that the board needs? And can they work with others? Serving on a board requires cooperation and compromise; you don't always get your way, even when you know you're "right." Some otherwise fine people never seem to accept that, and are probably better off serving as board consultants than members.

## HOW SHOULD YOU SELECT BOARD MEMBERS?

There are a number of ways to recruit board members. Many organizations rely on referrals, recommendations, or personal contacts of current board members. Others turn to board banks, which help

match nonprofits with people who want to serve. (For more on board banks, see "Defining Your Board's Needs" in "Weapons of Board Instruction" on page 23.)

Any method is acceptable, provided it recruits good people. Critical questions to ask: Who should contact prospective members? And what information should candidates be given regarding board responsibilities? There's sometimes a temptation to downplay board responsibilities lest good candidates be driven away. Honesty is important, however. A common reason for board resignations is that members didn't realize what they were getting into, especially in terms of financial obligations or legal liabilities. To avoid misunderstandings, it's a good idea to have new board members sign a contract detailing what's expected of them.

## THE CARE AND FEEDING OF THE BOARD

Consider why a person would want to serve on your board. Social concern? Civic duty? Ego gratification? Personal advancement? Networking? Friend making? Maybe it's a bit of all these.

Since there are seldom many extrinsic rewards (such as money) for being on a board, you must capitalize on intrinsic ones (such as self-satisfaction and a sense of achievement) to motivate people. Here are some suggestions:

**Orient them.** Boards are increasingly being held liable for the actions of their organization, so it's important that they know their obligations. An orientation program

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for new members is essential, along with periodic training sessions (workshops, seminars, retreats) for everyone.

**Keep them informed.** They're organizational insiders, not outsiders. They should never have to learn about an organizational activity by seeing it in the local newspaper or hearing about it from friends. Hold regular meetings to keep board members involved in the organization's work. Provide them with professional publications. Include them in the conferences staff members attend.

**Give them something specific to do.** Make sure they feel their work is meaningful—unlike an arts director who once described his function on the board as “to raise money and stay out of the way.” A third of that

board quit, and the director didn't last long either.

**Give them feedback.** If you expect the board to give advice, you have to listen to it. When board members make suggestions, respond promptly and thoughtfully. Board members who can't talk to the staff will often talk to people outside the organization, and that's not good.

**Recognize them for what they do.** Mention their names in publicity pieces. Acknowledge their service with awards. Specifically invite them to organizational social events. Treat them as the crucially important people they are.

A good board is a priceless asset. When the board's function is well defined and members well selected and well treated, everyone wins—especially those the organization serves. ■

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## Weapons of Board Instruction

These and many other articles on boards are available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members):

- **Defining Your Board's Needs** (Vol. 26, No. 1)
- **How to Assess and Improve Your Board's Performance** (Vol. 24, No. 1)
- **Look Beyond Tradition to Diversify Your Board** (Vol. 22, No. 4)
- **Eight Questions Every Board Member Needs to Answer** (Vol. 22, No. 3)
- **Reciprocal Board Agreements: What Do Board Members Give? What Do They Receive in Return?** (Vol. 28, No. 1)
- **How to Prepare Board Members to Govern Effectively** (Vol. 25, No. 6)
- **Reduce Your Risk of Liability** (Vol. 21, No. 3)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Board Governance ([www.snpo.org/lino](http://www.snpo.org/lino)).



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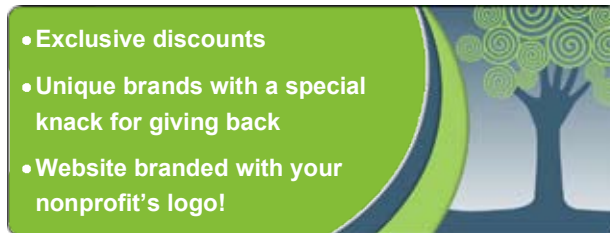
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