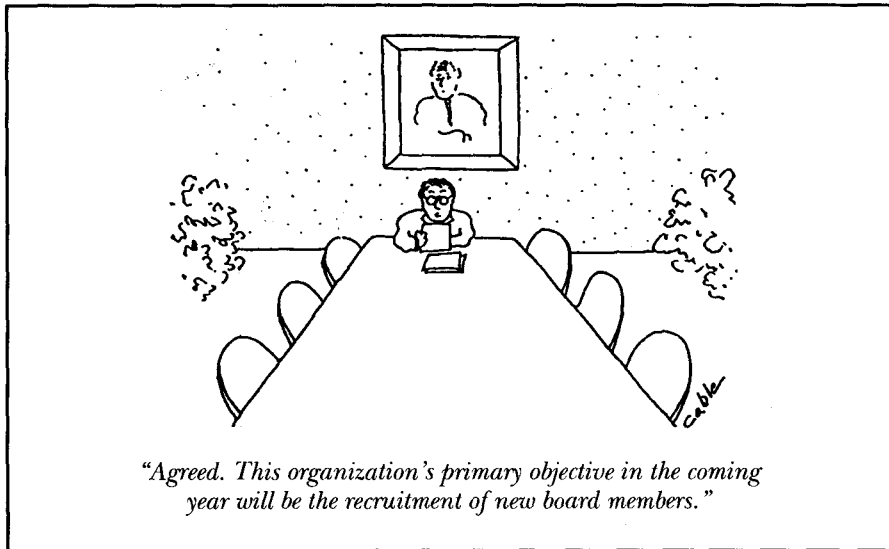# How to Create an Effective Board

How many people, with what qualifications, should you elect to your board? Here are some guidelines.

By Alice Gore King

"Agreed. This organization's primary objective in the coming year will be the recruitment of new board members."

An effective nonprofit board of directors is one in which members attend meetings faithfully, hold directed discussions, perform the jobs assigned to them, and immediately put through the motions carried. How can you choose such members for your board?

First, elect people who are qualified, properly motivated, and dependable—and don't elect too many. Give each person a specific responsibility, and retain only those who carry their responsibilities. Simple as that sounds, it's a tall order.

Qualified. This means that the thinking of board members is in tune with that of the organization. They are interested in its subject and purpose, agree with its principles, and believe in its programs. If sit-ins and marches are among the activities, for example, people who prefer different approaches may not be right for the board.

Competency must be the first priority in choosing candidates. Select those who can do the job, not those to whom you owe a favor.

In general, there should be representatives from business and industry, the professions, perhaps members of the community, civic leaders, and the government. They should be able to see ahead, suggest ways to

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Figure 1. Association of Active Volunteers			
Board of Directors			
Chair	Vice Chair	Secretary	Treasurer
Committee Responsibilities of Board Members			
Community Relations	Dinner Meetings	Education	Finance
Luncheon Meetings	Membership	Newsletter	Nominating
Program	Publication	Publicity	Speakers Bureau

deal with problems, be constructive in their thinking, and suggest solutions when they find fault.

More specifically, there probably ought to be a lawyer, a financier, someone with public relations acumen, and a fundraiser. In some cases it may be desirable to have a publicist, human relations administrator, and someone whose field is related to that of the organization. For example, there should be a physician or gerontologist on the board of a retirement community or nursing home.

Properly motivated. One reason for accepting a board membership is prestige. It is an honorary appointment. People like to see their names listed on letterheads and

Board members should not be offered the appointment if they attach a string.

brochures, and they like adding the fact to their résumés. But that is not enough.

They may also be motivated by a desire to serve. They may feel grateful for what their community has done for them and want to repay it. Or they may themselves be using the services of the organization (a private school that their children attend).

But their input should be tailored to the needs of the organization, not to their own self-interest. The photography club of a suburban town elected a chemist to its board of directors because he was an amateur photographer on the side. But it turned out that his interest was in getting his work exhibited, not in the concerns of the club. He was not an appropriate selection for the board.

Dependable. Board members should have the time to attend meetings and to shoulder their assignments. They should not be offered the appointment if they attach a string. Saying they will attend only those meetings that are held on Tuesdays or in the evening disqualifies them.

Not too many. A board should not be large. The larger it is, the more likely the members are to leave things to others. About 12 or 15—give or take a few—is manageable. But a guiding factor is the size of the program and load of business.

A board of directors is the continuity of the organization's governance. Its function is to establish policy, be responsible for raising funds, and oversee operations. The president or executive director is the paid administrator who supervises and directs the day-to-day business and carrying out of policy. In time, paid administrators resign, are replaced, or retire. The board, on the other hand, is constant. *Individual* members change, but as an entity it is self-perpetuating.

One type of board set-up is as follows:

- around 12 members, divided into three classes, each for terms of three years

- four officers: the chair, vice chair, secretary, treasurer (and sometimes others such as corresponding secretary, recording secretary, second vice chair, etc.)

- an executive committee com-

The 10 Commandments for Boards of Directors

By Roger Fritz

1 *Thou shall insist upon having a plan.*

2 *Thou shall not allow personal relationships to prevent objective decisions.*

3 *Thou shall not confuse size with superiority.*

4 *Thou shall criticize only by offering a better idea.*

5 *Thou shall obtain all facts available and several opinions before deciding.*

6 *Thou shall avoid hiring chief executives who have risked little.*

7 *Thou shall prove thy critics wrong by deeds and arguments.*

8 *Thou shall not set indistinct goals, for they yield insignificant results.*

9 *Thou shall get firm commitments for corrections by a certain date with checkpoints to keep the plan on schedule.*

10 *Thou shall not meddle in day-to-day decisions, but focus on the future.*

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posed of the four main officers, who decide matters of immediate importance between meetings

- often a stipulation that board members and officers may be elected for only two consecutive terms.

Figure 1 shows the set-up of the hypothetical Association of Active Volunteers.

Consider the first board of a newly founded organization. Suppose it has been decided that there will be 12 people on the board. The bylaws will state: "The board of directors shall consist of 12 or more members." This implies 12 without being restrictive. It is important that the bylaws be loose, not tie hands.

To get the ball rolling and start the cycle of three-year terms, the first board will have four people who will serve for three years, four for two years, and four for one year. These are the three classes. At the end of the first year, elections will be held to replace the one-year members, this time for a three-year term. They may be the same people or new ones. The following year, the original two-year members will be re-elected or replaced for a three-year-term. By the third year, the revolving pattern will be established.

To elect board members, a nominating committee, appointed by the chair, searches for candidates and presents a slate to the board at the annual meeting. Nominations may be made from the floor, and then a vote is taken.

But here lies a difficulty that too often causes poor results. Although this nominating committee may be appointed at the time of the annual meeting, it is apt to wait until the last minute before getting to work. Then it makes a hasty, superficial search. Instead, it should devote the whole year, not just a few weeks, to finding candidates. And it should be monitored periodically.

Be sure it's clear who's in charge. The chair must be ready to accept blame along with credit and to lead continually—just as parents should guide, discipline, and remain constant. If the board chair is weak, easily swayed, and unable to take responsibility, the board will flounder.
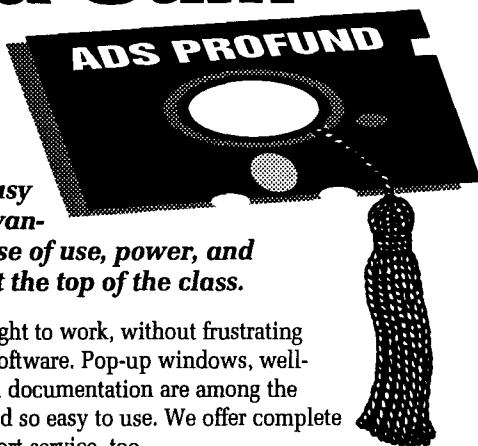
Having an effective board may not be easy, but it *is* simple. The key is to turn all efforts toward finding appropriate board members—and to draw on *all* of them. ∎

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These publications are available through the Society For Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog,* included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).