

Board Building: The Nominating Committee's Role

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Creating a strong board requires many key ingredients, including the existence of a thoughtful and inclusive nominating or governance committee. In some cases, if an organization doesn't have a nominating committee in place, the executive committee may fill the role of suggesting prospective board members in collaboration with the executive leadership team. It is extremely important that any group charged with identifying, cultivating, and recruiting board members takes the time needed to engage in a thorough selection process. The future of the organization depends on the quality and effectiveness of the people working together to oversee its mission, as well as its executive and artistic leadership; hold its financial and organizational sustainability in trust for the community; and represent the many stakeholders and interests of its programs and services.

This article focuses on the nominating committee's role and addresses points to consider related to maintaining strong relationships in the community while enhancing the organization's ability to achieve greater impacts. We will touch upon how to assess your existing board, where to find candidates with diverse personal and professional backgrounds, how to cultivate relationships, and how to make the official invitation to join the board.

Framing Board Building Goals

It should be noted that for evolving board building practices to succeed, a clearly articulated organizational mission and vision is essential. This will create the underlying context in which an organization can consider a few key board building questions:

- Why do we need to build the board today and have a long-term board leadership succession plan in place for the future?
- Where are we now, and where do we want to be in the years to come as our programs and community evolve?
- What types of personal and professional attributes are needed in an inclusive approach to governing the organization and representing the community it serves?
- Who is currently in our sphere of influence that has demonstrated a commitment and the capacity to be involved?

- How are we going to achieve our board building goals with the resources needed to attract and cultivate board prospects that align with our short- and long-term organizational goals?
- When is the best time to invite individual prospects to join the board and what is the best sequencing of activities that will lead to their acceptance of the role?

Assess Your Board's Needs

The first step in identifying prospective board members is to take stock of your existing resources in the context of the future direction of the organization. Many organizations use a board profile worksheet in order to objectively understand the expertise, skills, and personal and professional attributes to gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and gaps of current board members as a group. A simple chart that further considers the board's professional affiliations, philanthropic interests, education, age, gender, race, sexual orientation, financial resources, past contributions, community connections, leadership qualities, and their availability to support the organization can be very helpful in understanding what is missing from the current mix of the board.

In addition, many organizations have begun using board self-assessment tools to understand their internal resources and identify strategies to leverage board strengths and address weaknesses. In the self-assessment process, each board member is asked to assess how the board is doing in relation to the organization's mission, strategic planning, fundraising, fiscal oversight, and overall effectiveness, among other areas. Consideration of the board's relationship with executive and artistic leadership, staff, and the community-at-large are all considered during this process.

Finally, the board reviews its past effectiveness in the orientation and education of new and existing board members. Once this analysis is completed, the nominating or governance committee can consider the results to more effectively understand the capabilities of the existing board and determine what new resources will be needed to become more proficient in each of the areas above.

Identify Your Prospects

With this preliminary analysis completed, the nominating committee moves forward in identifying prospects, performing due diligence related to their public image and past board service, and making recommendations to the full board for discussion and consensus. It is vital this step take place before any kind of overture is made to a board prospect. A board member should never be invited to join without the agreement of the board. The nominating committee should also periodically solicit prospect names from the entire board, as well as the executive and artistic leadership team, to keep them engaged in an inclusive process. Remember also that just because there are a certain number of positions available on the board per organizational bylaws, it does not necessarily mean that those valuable positions should be immediately filled.

First, there must be careful consideration of how and why each prospective member fits into the board's identification, cultivation, and recruitment plan.

The nominating committee should also continue tracking and maintaining records of those who are not ready to join the board currently but have the capacity to be effective board members in the future. It is also crucial for the committee to work closely with the senior leadership team in reviewing prospects from lists of long-time subscribers and members, individual donors, corporate sponsors, and others who they feel would be committed to the mission, vision, and values of the institution. Selecting candidates who already have a commitment to the organization, rather than those with resources or skills but no connection to the organization or its mission, is more likely to result in a shorter timeline in the conversion of board prospects into successful board members.

Cultivate Your Relationships

Once you have found a pool of prospects that have been thoroughly reviewed by the nominating committee, those closest to the prospect will need to cultivate their interest. Prospective board members must know what your organization is about and experience its quality and culture to be effectively cultivated. At this point, helping the prospect understand the organization's strengths, as well as its challenges, can lead to more open conversations on how that board prospect might help the organization, but equally as important is how the organization serves the needs of that prospect.

An important technique is to also speak about a prospect's interest in the organization in general, their involvement in other nonprofits, and their personal and business connections. Other important cultivation tools include inviting prospects to special behind-the-scenes events with artists so that they can experience the programs and culture of the organization. Lunches or private meetings with your organization's executive and artistic leaders, as well as board leadership, will also pique a prospect's interest. Helping them understand organizational and board structure, financial and business model frameworks, and overall organizational strategy and impacts continue to build confidence and trust.

Keep in mind that this is still in the phase of cultivating a board prospect. This is a delicate balance, as prospects have not yet been elected to the board and should not be led to believe that this initial step is an invitation to join the board. The cultivation phase is extremely important in ensuring a positive image for the organization in the community and that the board prospect's needs are being addressed in a mutually beneficial way. Typically, explaining the roles and responsibilities of being on the board, along with listening carefully to the motivations for joining, can lead to deeper understanding. Cultivation is simply exploring a prospect's interest in order to report back to the nominating committee and board that an individual is ready, willing, and able to serve. As this phase is underway, the nominating committee should meet often to assess prospects, compare their needs to the results of the self-assessment, and prioritize candidates based on the timing of existing and anticipated board vacancies.

Several organizations have a long-term cultivation plan that invites potential board members to serve on a committee before formally moving them into the nomination stage. While not all committees allow non-board participants, many do invite participation, particularly in areas such as development, marketing, and special events, where professional expertise and networks are highly valuable. This practice has proven to be an effective way to assess a prospect's commitment, engagement, and capacity before extending a formal board invitation.

Overall, the individual being cultivated might view the situation as a solicitation for a contribution, advice, board membership, or any number of other roles associated with your institution. They might even suspect you are recruiting them for board membership, but no official invitation to join should be made to the prospect until the time is right. If a prospect expresses interest in the board, a resume or biography should be solicited for further consideration by the nominating committee and later by the board after ongoing due diligence. This due diligence could include inquiries about the prospect's past board service at other organizations and a deeper understanding of their motivations for joining one or more boards.

Recruit Your Board Members

Finally, it is time to extend an invitation to the prospect formally asking them to serve on the board. This occurs after the nominating committee has presented its recommendation and candidate biographies to the full board, and the board concurs that a prospect should be invited to join. Meetings with the executive, artistic, and board leadership must occur to ensure that all parties are ready for a fruitful working relationship with mutually beneficial and agreed upon expectations.

At this stage, the prospective board member must receive full disclosure on what is happening at the organization, including its programs and services, financial position, schedule of meetings, roles and responsibilities of board members, and any other details about board service and organizational direction. This is the crucial moment where expectations must be established, including outlining the board's policies on giving or raising funds. The prospect needs to feel comfortable with their decision, and the organization must know that the person is fully committed. Additionally, a follow-up written document that outlines the major financial and institutional policies that have been established by the board should be provided. Many organizations have a board manual with many details about the organization, as well as an onboarding program to ensure that the early stages of the relationship are positive and productive.

Conclusion

The nominating committee is an important part of the overall board building cycle. Once a board member has been recruited, there is more work to be done in the due diligence phase, as well as in orienting, engaging, educating, and evaluating the effectiveness of the board and its members. A commitment to a strategic identification, cultivation, and recruitment plan are the first steps

in developing a highly engaged and effective board to achieve maximum impact throughout the community.

Note: The above was inspired by *The Board Building Cycle, Second Edition: Nine Steps to Finding, Recruiting, and Engaging Nonprofit Board Members*, Berit M. Lakey Ph.D., BoardSource, 2007.