



## **Board Building: The Nominating Committee's Role**

By Bruce D. Thibodeau, Arts Consulting Group, Inc.

Creating a strong board requires many key ingredients, including the existence of a strong nominating committee. In some cases, if the organization doesn't have a broad committee structure, the executive committee may fill the role of suggesting prospective board members. 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, as the future of the organization depends on the quality and effectiveness of the people working together to achieve the organization's mission.

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 impact on the community. We'll touch upon how to assess your existing board, where to find strong candidates, how to cultivate relationships and, ultimately, how to make the official invitation to join the board.

It should be noted that in order for these "best practices" to achieve the greatest impact, having a clearly articulated organizational vision will create the underlying context in which to answer the questions "Where are we now?", "Where do we want to be in the future?" and "HOW are we going to get there? (or, in other words, what board resources do we need to attract and cultivate in order to achieve our goals.)"

### **IDENTIFY 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 data to gain a deeper knowledge of the strengths of current board members individually and as a group. A simple chart that further analyzes the board by age, gender, race, financial resources/contributions, community connections, leadership qualities, availability to contribute time to organizational priorities, education and other attributes can be very helpful in understanding what is missing from the current mix of board time, talent, and treasure.

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

Finally, the board looks at its past effectiveness in the selection and orientation of new and existing board members. Once this analysis is completed, the nominating or board development committee can review the results to more effectively understand the abilities 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 analysis completed, the nominating committee moves forward, identifying prospects 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 candidate. A prospective board member should never be invited to join without the agreement of the board. It should also periodically solicit prospect names from the entire board in order to keep them engaged in the process. Remember also that, just because there are a certain number of "slots" available on the board, that doesn't 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 strategic recruitment plan

Even when a pool of candidates exists, or all slots on the board are filled, the nominating committee should periodically solicit prospect names from the entire board in order to keep them engaged in the process. The nominating committee should also always be tracking and maintaining records of those who are not ready now, 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 staff in reviewing prospects from lists of long-time subscribers, individual donors, corporate donor management, 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 its mission, is more likely to result in the conversion of prospects to successful board members.

### **CULTIVATE YOUR PROSPECTS**

Once you've 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.

Keep in mind that this is still the "dating" phase of cultivating a board prospect. This is a delicate balance, as prospects haven't yet been elected to the board and should not be led to believe that this initial step is a "proposal." The dating phase is extremely critical in ensuring a

positive image for the organization in the community. One tactic that many organizations use is to ask an individual to assist with identifying other board prospects. Typically this results in you explaining the roles and responsibilities of being on the board, so that they can then suggest friends who might be prospects. This exchange of information can conclude with a general question as to whether they themselves would have interest in serving on the board.

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. 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 cultivation tools include inviting prospects to special behind-the-scenes events with artists, so that they can experience the culture of an organization. Lunches or private meetings with your organization's artistic/curatorial and administrative leaders will also pique a prospect's interest. Prospective board members must know what your organization is about and experience its quality and culture in to be effectively cultivated. At this point, 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 courting them for board membership, but no invitation to join, not even an unofficial indication that such an invitation may be forthcoming, should be made to the prospect. If a prospect expresses interest in the board, a resume or biography should be solicited for further consideration.

As this dating phase is underway, the nominating committee should meet often to assess prospects, compare their needs to the results of the assessment surveys, and prioritize candidates based on timing of existing and anticipated board vacancies.

## **RECRUIT YOUR BOARD MEMBERS**

Finally, it's time to make the invitation to recruit the prospect by 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 artistic/curatorial and executive 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 performances/exhibits, 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 should be provided that outlines the major financial and institutional policies that have been established by the board. In some

instances, a board contract or agreement may be signed to ensure that these commitments and responsibilities have been clearly defined and agreed upon.

## **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 orienting, engaging, educating, and evaluating the effectiveness of the board and its members in order to achieve the organization's maximum impact in the community. But a commitment to a strategic recruitment plan and a thorough cultivation process is the first step in developing a top-notch board.

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