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Developing a Board Recruitment Plan

How does the board recruit board directors that are committed to the organization and possess skills, knowledge and other attributes needed in order for the board to effectively carry out its responsibilities?

Introduction

Board governance offers an exciting opportunity to build a nonprofit leadership team around shared values and priorities. This article on identification and recruitment of board directors will offer a step-by-step approach to take advantage of this opportunity.

The first board development practice, and by far the most important, is having an effective board recruitment and nominations process in place. Most board performance problems can often be traced to the casual or haphazard way that some organizations go about recruiting, selecting and orienting board directors. In many organizations, board recruitment and nominations activities are really ad hoc in nature. Typical bylaw language describes a process in which the board president appoints a nominations committee whose short-term task is to recruit candidates that will fill a specified number of vacancies at the upcoming annual meeting.

A key problem is the traditional nominating committee. In many organizations, if there even is a formal nominating committee, it typically does little real recruiting work. Instead the nominating committee often relies on whomever is available from a relatively closed "circle of friends and supporters" already known to the organization or the committee members.

In contrast to the typical short-term recruitment process that focuses narrowly on filling anticipated board vacancies for the current year, the process that will be described in this article helps to assure that there is a long-range plan for board leadership recruitment and development. In this approach, the identification and recruitment of organization board directors assumes major importance. More than any other single factor, it will determine the long-term viability of the organization.

This long-range plan for recruiting and developing future board leadership centers on the following questions: Who will be serving on and leading the board over the next three to five years? What is our plan to scout board leadership talent for the future? How will we go about fostering and developing future board leadership? What we're really talking about here is extending the timeline for board recruitment and development activities.

Elements of an Effective Recruitment Process

Here are some of the characteristics of a long-range board recruitment and development process:

- **Establish year-round committee.** Because board recruitment and nominations is such an important activity, we need to begin looking at it as a year-round committee function instead of the traditional ad hoc nominations process. Reflecting this long-range focus, many boards are changing the name of their Nominations Committee to the Board Development Committee because developing leaders includes more than nominating people to serve on our boards. It truly is an ongoing, year-round function: prospecting, contacting, recruiting, orienting, supporting, providing ongoing training, and evaluating board directors.
- **Link recruitment to the strategic plan.** It is important to match board recruitment and development activities with the new requirements and demands called for by the strategic plan. The ideal time to do this is right after the strategic planning process has been completed. The organization board, or the Board Development Committee, reviews the mission, vision, goals and strategies, and then determines any new skills, knowledge, personal contacts and other attributes future board directors will need to possess in order for the board to do its part in advancing the strategic plan.
- **Profile the current board.** At the same time, we need to analyze the current shape of the organization's board. The Board Development Committee can create a profile of the current board using a matrix designed for this purpose. Key factors that define sought-after expertise, knowledge, skills, experience, as well as relevant demographic factors are arranged down the side of the matrix. The names of current board directors are listed along the top of the matrix. The Committee then uses the matrix to complete the profile. In the Tools Section of this article, there are examples of matrices for use in board recruitment planning.
- **Focus the recruiting priorities.** By reviewing the organization's strategic plan as well as the profile of current board strengths and weaknesses, the Board Development Committee identifies the gap between the skills and knowledge needed on the board, and what board directors currently possess. Based on this analysis, the Board Development Committee can now set clear recruiting priorities for future board recruitment.
- **Develop a written board director job description.** Another key element in the board development process is a written board director job description. For the organization's governance board to operate successfully each member must understand and accept the specific duties and responsibilities that come with board directorship. More and more organizations have found it helpful to develop a written statement or agreement for board directors. This statement serves as a job description and clarifies board responsibilities. The job description, in very clear language, sets forth the expectations the organization has of its board directors. The most effective job descriptions are those that state in behavioral terms precisely what board directors are expected to do.

For most organization boards, key responsibilities include the following:

1. Consistent attendance at regular board meetings;
2. Participation as an active member on at least one committee;
3. Participation in the fund-raising activities of the organization in a manner appropriate for that board director; and
4. Preparation in advance before regular board meetings by reading and studying materials sent in advance regarding key actions the board is expected to take at the next meeting.

In addition, many organizations now expect their board directors to attend an annual board planning or education event sometimes held on an evening, or a weekend. While there is no one right way to develop a job description, the format that you choose should cover some of the expectations listed above. There are sample organization board director job descriptions in the Tools Section of this article.

This written job description, which should be periodically reviewed and updated by the Board of Directors, is the critical tool in recruitment of new board directors. Like anyone contemplating a serious volunteer commitment, prospective organization board directors will want to know what is expected of them including an estimate of the required time. Avoid the temptation to downplay the responsibilities of board directorship in order to make it “easy” for the board recruit to say “YES”. New board directors will eventually find out what the true expectations are and if they are different from what they were told before coming on to the board, you’re in trouble! The sample job descriptions in the Tools Section of this article of the workbook include some of the basic expectations that most organizations should have for their board directors. The samples are not intended to serve the needs of every organization; rather, consider them as the starting point in the design of a job description that matches your needs.

Sample Recruiting Timetable

Step 1. Establish A Board Development Committee

As suggested earlier in this article, board recruitment is a year-round, ongoing activity. It requires an active committee to guide the process. In some cases, the bylaws will mandate a committee to oversee the board recruitment and nominations. If not, the board needs to establish such a committee. In the past, this committee has usually been called the board nominations committee or the board recruitment committee. More and more organizations are renaming this committee the “Board Development Committee” to reflect the other critical responsibilities of this group. In the Tools Section of this article, there is a sample job description for the Board Development Committee.

Step 2. Preparation For Active Board director Recruitment.

Effective preparation for board director recruitment begins with reviewing the following:

- **Bylaws of the organization.** The bylaws should spell out who is eligible to serve on the organization board. There may be specific requirements to include a number of parents, community members, and others. You need to be sure that you are in compliance with the bylaws, which is after all a legal document, regarding composition of the board, length of terms, number of vacancies to be filled, as well as the manner in which vacancies are to be filled. In some cases, board directors are elected from a field of candidates greater than the actual number of vacancies. In other cases, the Board Development Committee is empowered by the organization board with the responsibility to search for the best-qualified candidates and bring a slate to the board which then votes some or all of the slate into office according to provisions of the bylaws.
- **Position description for board directors.** This position description or job description described above spells out the responsibilities of board directorship. If you don’t have one, you need to develop one. It is a critical tool in building an effective board. If you already have a position description, review it to make sure it is up-to-date and reflects your expectations of board director performance.

- **Strategic plan.** Especially after a new strategic plan has been developed, it is important to review the strategic plan to determine if there are any implications for governance. For example, as a result of the strategic plan, the organization may have determined that board needs to be more diverse or that the organization needs to strengthen its relationship with key segments of the outside community. Such strategic priorities will have bearing on board director recruitment.

Step 3. Develop A Profile Of The Current Board

The Board Development Committee, utilizing one of the board profile matrices included in the Tools Section of this article, develops a profile of the current board. The recruiting matrix analyzes the current board according to criteria set previously. Some common examples of criteria include: age, race, ethnicity, specific skills, community contacts, etc.

The review activities in step 2 might suggest new criteria to add to the profile and/or criteria that should be dropped. Using the results of the profile, the Board Development Committee creates a set of recruiting priorities that will guide recruitment efforts. Examples of recruiting priorities might include:

- More community leaders who have the ability to raise significant sums of money;
- More individuals living in the community served by the organization.

Because the recruiting priorities will determine which individuals will be considered for board directorship (and which individuals will not be considered), the recruiting priorities should be reviewed by the board before the Board Development Committee goes on to the next step.

Step 4. Develop An Initial List Of Prospective Board Directors

The Board Development Committee, utilizing the results of step 2 and 3 above as well as input from the executive director, develops an initial list of prospective board directors. Which individuals best fit the criteria, which is to say, which individuals match the recruiting priorities established by the Board Development Committee. It is important to “throw the net wide” and consider a number of potential board recruits greater than the number of projected vacancies. For example, if you are filling four vacancies on the organization board, initially try to identify 10-12 potential candidates. (You can do it!)

After identifying this initial list of prospective board directors, the Board Development Committee should then examine the individuals more closely in light of the recruiting priorities previously set. Based on this review, the board can rank the individuals within the initial list.

Step 5. First Round Of Personal Contact With Top Recruiting Prospects

The Board Development Committee is now ready to initiate personal contacts with the individuals at the top of the prospect list. These contacts can be made using a variety of methods. Here is one sequence that seems to work well.

The first contact is made to by means of printed materials mailed to the prospect. (A sample recruitment packet is included in the Tools Section of this article) The mailing consists of the following:

- A personalized cover letter that informs the prospect of the board's interest in them, a brief description of the recruitment and nominations process, and asking if they would like to be considered for board directorship.
- A copy of the position description described earlier that details the roles and responsibilities of a board director.
- Additional material about the board and its responsibilities
- A response form that the prospect can return indicating they would like more information and/or they want to be considered for board directorship.

This mailing is followed up with personal calls from designated members of the Board Development Committee to the prospects. This is an important step even if the prospects are already well-known by members of the committee. In the personal call, the Board Development Committee member can respond to any questions the prospect may have as well as determine the prospect's level of interest in being considered for board directorship. If the prospect wants more information and/or wants to be seriously considered for board directorship, they are invited to attend an in-person orientation session.

In advance of the orientation session, prospective board directors can also be offered an opportunity to visit the organization if they are unfamiliar with it, to observe the programs in action, and talk with the executive director and other staff. Additionally the prospective board director can be invited to attend a meeting of the board to get an idea of how the board makes decisions and conducts business. Such activities can also occur after the in-person orientation described in Step 6 below.

Step 6. Scheduling And Conducting Orientation Sessions With Prospective Board Directors

The next step is to schedule and conduct in-person orientation sessions with prospective board directors who have responded to the mailing and phone calls described in step 5. These orientation sessions are an opportunity for members of the Board Development Committee, the chairperson of the board and the executive director to explain more fully the roles and responsibilities of the board as a whole as well as individual board director responsibilities. The presence of the board chair and the executive director in such orientation sessions conveys to board prospects the importance of the position they are being asked to consider. It takes time from the busy schedules of key organization leaders but the payoff is immense and long term. If time does not permit, the second best would be attendance by one or more members of the Board Development Committee and the executive director.

A sample orientation agenda might include the following:

- Welcome and introductions
- Overview of the mission, vision and goals of the organization.
- Overview of the roles and responsibilities of the Board of Directors.
- Review of the individual board director job description detailing specific expectations (for example, committee work, meeting attendance, involvement in community outreach and fund-raising, etc.)

- Opportunity for board prospects to ask questions
- Declarations of willingness to serve by the board prospects
- Other information required to continue in the board recruitment process (for example, completion of a questionnaire—see example in the Tools Section of this article, etc.)
- Next steps (this depends on the manner in which new members are brought on to the organization board; for example, will there be an election or will the Board Development Committee create a slate of names that is then brought to the full board for action.

At the end of the orientation session, individuals who now understand what is expected of board directors and who wish to continue in the process, are asked to complete a questionnaire that provides some background information. A sample of this questionnaire, “Board Application Form”, can be found in the Tools Section of this article. If your bylaws call for election, some of this information can be included in candidate profiles that are distributed to all individuals eligible to vote. If their interest level is very high, this questionnaire can also be distributed to board prospects in advance of the orientation session. Otherwise they’ll need the deadline date for returning the completed questionnaire to the Board Development Committee.

Resist the temptation to excuse some individuals from attendance at the orientation sessions. It is critical that all prospective board directors get the same information and that they all have an opportunity to ask any and all questions before they are asked to indicate their willingness to serve on the board. Remember, these individuals are being asked to make a serious time commitment that, in most cases, spans two to three years. If they insist they don’t have an hour and a half of time to attend the orientation, it should raise some questions about their level of commitment. And, heaven forbid, that a board prospect makes a commitment to attend the orientation and then doesn’t show without even a phone call. What does this tell you about what to expect from this person in the future. Remember, the Board of Directors of the organization is entrusted with major decision-making responsibility. You need a team of people who can be depended upon.

Step 7. Selection/Appointment Of New Members To The CCOS Board.

After the orientation sessions for prospective board directors have been held, the Board Development Committee meets to review all of the individuals who participated. It will be important for the committee to check back on their recruiting priorities set earlier in the process.

In evaluating the prospective board directors, the Board Development Committee should ask the following questions:

- Does the prospect appear to be committed to the mission and philosophy of the organization?
- Can the prospect contribute the time necessary to be an effective board director?
- Does the prospect possess some of the key skills, knowledge and other assets that match the board to recruiting priorities?
- Does it appear that the prospect can place the organization’s purposes and interests

above their own professional and personal interests when making decisions as a board director?

The next step, the final selection/appointment of new members to the organization board, depends on the provisions of the organization's bylaws. If the bylaws call for an election from among all interested individuals, the Board Development Committee will develop ballots and other election materials as required.

If the bylaws give the authority for selection of new board directors to the board itself, then the Board Development Committee can prepare a slate that includes the names of the candidates that asked reflect the recruiting priorities that were set at the beginning of the process. The board has the option however, to ask the Board Development Committee to bring the names of all individuals identified in the recruitment process described above. The board will then select a number of candidates to fill the vacant positions.

In either case, whether by election or by board selection, new members then take their place on the organization board. Other orientation activities occur. See the next article for more ideas on how to carry out the orientation of new board directors

Building Board Diversity

An issue for organization boards and board of other organizations today is achieving diversity in composition of the board. According to research commissioned by the Aspen Institute[1], factors related to building and maintaining board diversity include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Having a nominating committee that is committed to building diversity.
- Making diversity a priority for the organization.
- Avoiding "tokenism" or an expectation that one person of color can represent the entire community.
- Engaging in cultural diversity training and activities.

The overwhelming conclusion of this study was the consensus that building board diversity is a difficult process that requires constant attention for success. The organization board, if it is serious about building a diverse board needs to consider a written plan with concrete objectives that reflects some of the points listed above. Without a doubt, the best resource available on the subject is [Building Board Diversity](#) by Jennifer M. Rutledge. She states: "On an inclusive board, individual board directors contribute an array of talents, skills, and interests that result from their own experiences and origins. Collectively, the board is enriched by diversity as individuals take advantage of their differences to work successfully together on behalf of the organization."[\[2\]](#)

An effective plan for achieving and maintaining board diversity will include the following steps:

- What does "diversity" mean for your organization's board? In what ways do you want the board to be more diverse? (Race, ethnicity, age, sex, location, occupation, etc.)
- What are the barriers and obstacles to achieve diversity? What are the root causes?
- What strategies will overcome these barriers?

- Develop recruiting strategies targeted to the groups and constituencies from which you wish to recruit.
- Set specific measurable targets for achieving diversity, for example recruit at least two people with fundraising skills. Assign accountability for achieving the recruiting targets.
- Monitor progress.

Summary

While it is more time-consuming, if you utilize the approach to board director recruitment described in this article, the results will include:

- A more accurate assessment of the organization's board leadership needs,
- An organized process to identify, contact and secure commitments from the best qualified individuals to fill those board to leadership needs, and,
- A solid beginning on an orientation process for new board directors that has already begun with their first contacts with the organization during the recruitment process.

Models of these essential documents, procedures and practices gathered from organizations and other relevant examples that will be applicable to the board of a new organization can be found in the Tools Section that follows.

Family Members on the Board

A question that may arise in the nominations and recruitment process is, "Should family members the serve on the same board?" Here's what the National Center for Nonprofit Boards offers as advice^[3]:

If your organization does not have a policy on nepotism on board, it is wise to discuss the issue before it becomes one. There are no laws that forbid family members from serving on the same board, but it is prudent to have a mechanism in place to guide the board in this situation. Enforcing its conflict-of-interest policy is the minimum a board can do to avoid unbalanced decision-making.

Here are some questions for the nominating committee as it screens candidates:

- Is our board small enough to be vulnerable if family members with similar interests arrive to make decisions?
- Can we expect family members always to relate to issues as professionals and leave personal relationships at home?
- Are we limiting diversity on the board by inviting members of the same family to join the board?
- Do we have good processes in place to promote independent decision-making?
- Are we discriminating against candidates on the basis of their marital or family status?

- Are we choosing candidates for their personal qualifications only?

Tools You Can Use

Samples of foundation documents

- Board Development Committee Description
- Invitation Letter And Packet.
- Position Description For Individual Board Director.
- Prospective Board Director Application Form
- Board of Directors Nomination Form
- Board Profile Worksheet

Essential Resources for Board Recruitment

Board Director Orientation. Published by Aspen Publishers, Inc. In spite of the title, this publication includes a number of sample forms and documents useful in every step of the board recruitment process. As an added feature, all of the forms and worksheets in the manual are available on diskette.

Building Board Diversity, by Jennifer M. Rutledge. Published by the National Center for Nonprofit Boards. This publication provides a comprehensive approach for developing and implementing a plan to build a board that is more diverse and inclusive. One of the few resources of its kind, it includes a number of worksheets.

Board Recruitment Worksheets

[1] Fletcher, Kathleen, Building Board Diversity: Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, The Aspen Institute, August 1999.

[2] Rutledge, Jennifer M., Building Board Diversity, National Center for Nonprofit Boards, 1999.

[3] Source: Website of National Center for Nonprofit Boards. www.ncnb.org



"The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark." *Michelangelo* [View Past Quotes](#)

frank@createthefuture.com ▪ susan@createthefuture.com

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Revised: February 7, 2011