

Ideas to Enhance Your Board

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Before beginning, I'd like to thank all of you who for years have fought for freedom. You are all very talented people who could be making a lot more money, but you have chosen to fight for our republic and many of us are very grateful.

I've been asked to give you a perspective of boards from a board member's point of view. I'd like to convince you that an effective board will help your organization be even more successful. I'll touch on the necessity of board job description, how to choose and invite new members, how to integrate the new member, the issue of term limits and some general suggestions.

When I was first asked to be on a board, I was so flattered that I didn't ask many questions. The responsibilities were unclear and I was lost for the first few meetings. Here are some thoughts to avoid this situation.

First: have a board "job" description spelling out at least the following issues:

1. understand and agree with the Mission
2. willingness to promote the organization,
3. make sure the organization stays true to the mission,
4. look at the financial reports with a critical eye,
5. What financial support & fundraising activity is expected,
6. evaluation the CEO,
7. policy for length of service
8. committee responsibilities,
9. policy of attendance

In writing the description, remember that boards need a variety of people, those wealthy prominent people as well as the doers and idea people, all with a passion to spread your message. Another wards the 3 w's work, wisdom & wealth.

When I was asked to be on one board, I recall being told verbally about the responsibilities of a board member, nothing was in writing. After I was on the board for a year, those responsibilities seem to have been changed, which put me in an uncomfortable situation. Be sure you have written guidelines.

Second: How do you choose and then invite people to your board?

I'd recommend a nominating committee that would consider any new prospects. They should be willing to:

1. Look at the board as a whole and focus on what kind of person does the board need? Would the skills of an attorney, person in marketing, educator, CEO, CPA or entrepreneur be a good addition to the board? They may be key when you encounter difficulties. Consider having diversity of ages in your membership
2. Start off inviting the new prospect to events or discussions you might have. Check out how enthusiastic they are about your mission.
3. Find out what other activities they are involved in. Can they give your group the time and effort you are hoping for?
4. If they are a good candidate, the committee should interview them, then describe the organizations mission more fully and what is expected of a board member. If your “job description” is clear there should be no misunderstandings.
5. Generally the CEO and Chairman make the invitation and if he accepts they make a recommendation to the board..

Third: what is the best way to integrate the new board member? Here are some thoughts: Assign a mentor who would:

1. introduce them to the staff at the center
2. give them an historical perspective of the organization
3. discuss the current issues being worked on
4. go over minutes from the last few board meetings
5. have the mentor sit with the new member at the board meeting to help them feel comfortable, and answer any questions they might have.
6. ask them which committee they want to work on,
7. I'd review with them how to ask for donations. This can be awkward, but when you truly believe in the mission, you get motivated! Perhaps taking them on a donor visit with professional staff will help.
8. All these items should be included in a “Welcome Packet” that they can refer to.

Fourth: the issue term limits

Perhaps a way to revisit this issue is to look at it in a different way. Why not have the nominating committee also be in charge of talking to each member every other year about their service on the board. You would review their work, & their donation/ fundraising track record. It is also a good time to get feedback from them about the organization and the effectiveness of the board. Some times I think that people don't know how to get off a board comfortably. This approach might eliminate the problem. Finally, it is a wonderful time to thank the member for their service.

Fifth: Suggestions to the CEO and staff

1. Give your board members information at least one week before the meeting. Expect them to come prepared. Board meetings shouldn't be a "show and Tell" event by the staff. Expect participation. This can be modeled by listing the name of the person who will give the committee reports on the agenda. Make sure you start and end on time.
2. Be sure you always welcome board member's questions, suggestions and observations either at the meeting or privately. If they dominate the meeting, suggest they have a designated time to discuss their ideas at the next meeting.
3. Establish advisory boards for potential new members. This is an excellent way to engage people who are too busy right now, but like your mission. They can help you with ideas and contacts. You'll be able to check them out too!
4. Allow your board to change your "customs" Let them be bold and daring as long as you stay true to your mission. It is ok to have good and even heated discussions at your meetings. Then you will know that everyone is focused and engaged and the best decisions will be made.
5. Work with your board to have a complete succession plan. This will assure them that you are eager for the organization to continue when you aren't around. This also assures your donors that you have a future planned and their investment in the organization will be worthwhile. Donors worry about what will happen to the organization when the star is no longer around.
6. Again I'd strongly suggest that you establish committees within your board. Committees help direct the organization and allow Board members to participate with out being overwhelmed. Spell out the responsibilities for each committee. You might want to consider the following committees: Executive, Financial, Strategic planning, Trustee or Nominating, Marketing, and Development.
7. Have a staff member assigned to each committee. They can take notes, set up meetings at the direction of the chair, gather information and send it out before the next meeting.

I realize this sounds like a lot of work and you have enough to do as it is. Many of you might dream of getting a rubber stamp board full of wealthy prominent people that fund your every need, and fulfill the legal requirement. But if you have a well rounded board the long term benefits far outweigh the short term rubber stamp board. Your board members don't see the world as you do, they will have different ideas, networking possibilities and suggestions that you might never have thought of. Their expertise in their fields will benefit and enhance your organization.

I believe that the state public policy groups are one of the most effective ways to make changes in our country. Effective boards are a key ingredient to achieving this goal. Hopefully each of your Board members considers it a privilege to serve with you. By the

way, try and get a board member to attend an Atlas or SPN event. It wasn't until I saw what a huge new movement this is that I got really motivated to help out.