

Working Effectively with Boards of Directors

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Keep the board of directors (your governing board) small—preferably under 20. A large board is unwieldy and opens the door a variety of difficulties. A large board can diminish the important role of being on your board. It should be an honor that requires rare talents, abilities, and level of commitment.

What do you do with the people who might be qualified to serve on the board when there's no room for them and you want to keep them interested and involved? You might consider creating regional boards of advisors within your state (if you are a state-based organization) or in regions of the country (if you are a national organization) and then naming these other good people to these regional boards. Advisors should be business and professional people, separate from your board of scholars where you put your academics. Boards of advisors are not governing bodies, and may only meet a couple times a year, but it's a great way to keep people active and feeling valued. If your advisors are good, your organization will derive a lot of valuable insights and fundraising opportunities.

Putting good people on a board of advisors also allows you to take their measure, and think of them as possible future board of directors members. You'll be able to interact with them at meetings to see how they relate to others, and how others react to them.

CHOOSING MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Don't invite people who have never contributed to you in the hopes that being on your board might finally get them to. Make board membership something that you bestow on people who have already demonstrated their support and otherwise proven themselves to your case.

Chemistry between people is important, so choose people who regard themselves as peers. Each and every member must feel comfortable with the group or you won't keep them together for long. Avoid pontificators who try to dominate a meeting. Avoid the resume builders, who seem more interested in what you can do for them than in what they can do for you. Check out board candidates thoroughly before you ever even tell them they are being considered. Their relationships in the community can be an asset or a liability.

Pick people who have some areas of expertise of value to you but are also team players. They should be people who understand the crucial difference between the polar extremes of aloofness and micro-management. Preferably, they should have prior experience on other boards.

Focus on choosing people who can provide your organization with at least two of these three W's: work, wealth, and wisdom.

Don't choose people who have to be begged to renew their financial support annually or to attend meetings. You don't have time to cajole your own board. You need to be out talking to and winning new converts.

TERM LIMITS FOR BOARD MEMBERS

The case for term limits is much stronger in the public sector than in the private or nonprofit sectors. Never adopt term limits because you don't know how to move a bad egg off the board. That's a leadership cop-out.

DUTIES AND EXPECTATIONS

Inform prospective board members of their duties and your expectations before asking for their acceptance. Don't expect them to have to learn these things after they've accepted your invitation to join. Have a serious face-to-face discussion, not a quick phone call, to cover the following items:

Walk through the organization's history, current activities, and financial statements; explain the oversight and strategic planning responsibilities of the board.

Provide a packet of key publications, bylaws, articles of incorporation, etc.

EXPLAINING THE THREE W's: WORK WEALT AND WISDOM

Explain the importance of 100% of the board being regular, annual financial supporters. (It strengthens your hand in meeting with prospective donors if they ask, "Does your entire board give?" and you are able to say, "Absolutely, every year, in a significant way, no exceptions.") Invite them to consider the organization in their estate plans and ask approval to be able to say you're in them, even if they prefer not to mention any specific amount. Explain proper conduct at board meetings—promptness, regular attendance, don't dominate, accept committee assignments, etc.

Provide a list of ways they can help outside of board meetings: give money, give names of others who might financially support the organization, make calls, host receptions, write supporting letters, come to occasional board retreats and other public functions, give good advice and be accessible, speak highly of the organization and cite its work in public, etc.

Explain the importance of board members acting in concert with the board and staff. (It is confusing to your target audience and potentially damaging to your credibility to have board members surprising you with the statements they make on your organization's behalf.)

CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE BOARD MEETINGS

Work with your board chairman to establish agendas well in advance of board meetings. Remember that a board of directors' meeting is the chairman's meeting, not the president's. Don't wait until board meetings to lay out important documents like budgets, minutes from the last meeting, etc. These things should be provided well in advance so members come prepared. Also, make certain all financial statements are crystal clear.

And, have the staff color-code or paginate materials. Don't waste valuable board time shuffling through endless piles of paper that all look alike. Staff reporting to the board should come from more than one staff member—a president's report, vice president's report, development officer report, etc. Only those staff having assigned reports should be present at board meetings. All reports should be well-rehearsed and all audiovisual equipment thoroughly checked in advance of the meeting.

Never miss the opportunity at board meetings to solicit names of new prospective supporters for the organization. Bring names and ask, "Does anybody know them? If so, would you work with the appropriate staff to open a door with them?"

Your chairman should be encouraged to praise individual board members for special things they've done, but plan ahead so you don't leave anybody out. Chairmen should also end meetings with a hearty thanks and an optimistic, motivating note or inspirational message

AFTER THE MEETING

Thank your board members, in writing, for giving of their valuable time. Make sure staff follows up on issues they were assigned during the meeting. Board

members deserve a timely response, and important issues should not be left unresolved. Plan periodic board retreats for long-range planning in a relaxed atmosphere and schedule a social occasion every now and then if meetings don't afford sufficient opportunities for board members to get to know one another on a personal level.

Keep in mind that your board members should go away from meetings feeling that they have contributed to an important enterprise and their participation made a difference.

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