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# 10 “STOP” Signs on the Road to Board Recruitment

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We spend so much time talking about how to recruit, that we thought it was time for the flip side - the Help 4 NonProfits top 10 signs that your board is NOT ready to recruit.

If your board has one of these signs, we would recommend you reconsider recruiting new board members. If your board shows more than one of these signs, stop immediately! It's time to do some major readjustment before bringing anyone new into the mix.

Here they are - the Top 10 Signs of Recruitment UNreadiness:

## 1 Accountability:

If the board doesn't understand that it is not the CEO but the Board that is in the box at the top of the organizational chart, you are not ready to recruit. Being in that top box means accountability for everything that happens in the organization. If your board doesn't understand that the buck doesn't stop with the CEO but with the board, then recruiting should be the furthest thing from your minds.

**We've seen this:** For several years, an organization covered expenses by spending down every penny of a \$1.5million endowment. Every year, their board of high-powered business people approved a budget that actually planned for income from bequests, as if they could predict when their donors might die. When things finally came to a head, the board's response was to ask the ED, "Well what are you going to do about this?" It never occurred to them that THEY had been accountable for the mess all along!

If the board doesn't understand that it is ultimately accountable, and doesn't understand how to put that accountability into practice, you are not ready to recruit.

To learn what boards are accountable for, and to whom,  
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## 2 Micromanagement:

If your board micromanages, you are not ready to recruit. Some boards see micromanagement as the road to accountability. Some see it as a detriment, but still can't seem to stop. Either way, if your board is micromanaging, they are not ready to recruit.

**We've seen this:** An organization had come through a time of financial hardship. They had eliminated their debt and were now operating from a position of fiscal strength. The board, however, was still in hardship mode, scrutinizing every purchase, no matter

how small. They took 10 minutes at a board meeting to “investigate” why the staff went to one store vs. another, where they could have saved (I’m not kidding) \$20 on a \$200 item. The staff knew that every move they made would be second-guessed, and eventually they became immobilized. The board saw this as further proof of the need for scrutiny, and that cycle eventually crippled the organization.

Micromanagement is the opposite of accountability. True accountability is proactive and preventative, while micromanagement is reactive and fear-based. And recruitment will only perpetuate that.

For more information about micromanagement  
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### 3 Dysfunctional Board:

If you are hoping new board members will finally fix whatever problems your board has been having, you are not ready to recruit. From poor attendance to bickering and feuds, to the countless other issues boards face, adding new board members never solves those problems. It just brings more people into the morass, to endure and potentially exacerbate those problems.

**We’ve seen this:** Board members in a rural area often drove for as much as an hour to get to board meetings, only to find there was no quorum. Frustrated, they instituted policies for removing board members who failed to attend meetings, only to lose those board members entirely. The reason? Aside from reviewing reports, the board did virtually nothing of significance for the organization. Once the board refocused its purpose (and then refocused its meetings!), attendance was almost always 100%. And new board members could be assured that board meetings wouldn’t waste their time.

Regardless of what issues your board is dealing with, if you think recruitment will solve your board’s woes - you are not ready to recruit.

### 4 Board Giving:

If your board has no policy requiring board members to donate to the organization to the best of their means, you are not ready to recruit. This is NOT a fundraising issue. This is a living-by-example issue. If the board doesn’t believe the organization is worth investing in, why should a donor? How can we ask others to give generously when we haven’t done so ourselves?

**We’ve seen this:** Some of the board seats of an organization serving low income families are reserved for recipients of the service. As a condition of a large gift, a donor wanted to be assured the board had all donated as well. When the “client” board members were asked, “What amount could you give - even if it’s just 25¢?” they all gave. One client wept as she handed over a \$1 bill. “This is an honor. No one has ever asked me to participate in this way before,” she said. However, some of the non-client board members became angry, saying they were never told they would have to donate their time AND their money.

With a giving policy in place, prospective board members will know what is expected of them BEFORE they join the board, and before a donor puts them on the spot by asking, “Has all your board given to the organization?”

When donors look for advice before “investing” in a cause, will your organization measure up?

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### 5 Board / Staff Relations:

If the board’s relationship with the ED isn’t great (ok, it stinks), or there are hard feelings between the board and staff overall, you are not ready to recruit. When this critical relationship is not working well, it is just plain dumb to bring on new board members until you get to the heart of what is not working in the existing relationship.

**We’ve seen this:** An ED spent 20 years growing an organization to a nationally recognized and widely copied model for providing service. The board began attracting heavy-hitters, many of whom joined for the status of affiliating with this group, but who felt little passion for the mission. A rift was created between the board, who

was mostly concerned about the organization's finances (which were, by the way, in great shape), and the staff, who were mostly concerned about meeting the community need (for which they continued to maintain a stellar reputation). After a few years of this battle, the ED retired early. It has now been 2 years, and the board is still arguing over what they are looking for in a replacement ED.

Problems between the staff and the board are almost always symptoms of something larger - usually a lack of understanding / focus on the organization's vision or its values system. Until you have at least begun to address those deeper issues, you are not ready to recruit.

## 6 CEO as Recruiter

If your CEO is the one doing most (or all) of your board recruitment, you are not ready to recruit. Look at the organizational chart. Do you really want your CEO hand-picking his/her boss?

**We've seen this:** A CEO did all the recruiting. She also determined what would be on the board's agenda every month, and provided the board with the information she felt they should have. Not surprisingly, the board never did anything but rubber stamp what the CEO suggested. In this organization, the board really thought they worked for the CEO!

If the CEO is your board's main recruiter, then your board likely has far more problems than you might suspect. You are definitely not ready to recruit.

## 7 Organizational Planning

If the organization doesn't have a plans for how it will impact the community and plans for how it will ensure it has the capacity to create that impact, you are not ready to recruit. If you have plans, but the board has no clue about the status of those plans, you are not ready to recruit. Your organization's plans are your answer to the big questions - Why are we here? What are we trying to accomplish for the community? If the board can't answer those basic questions, then what exactly is the board doing?

**We've seen this:** An organization was required to have a strategic plan for accreditation. Every year they hired a consultant, created a plan, and did nothing to implement it. When they called to ask us to facilitate their next planning session, we told them we couldn't do a plan unless we were assured the board would monitor its implementation. And they had no idea what we meant.

If the board doesn't understand that "ensuring that the organization is making the community a better place" is one of their primary areas of accountability, the board is not ready to recruit.

## 8 No Board Policies:

If you don't use your bylaws and board policies to guide the board's work (do you even have board policies?), you are not ready to recruit. Does the board have term limits, or can someone be on the board forever? Is it clear what types of actions could get someone thrown off the board, and what the process would be for removing them? Without policies and procedures to guide board expectations, you are not ready to recruit.

**We've seen this:** A board president called for advice: One of his board members had embezzled from their small NonProfit, but the rest of the board wouldn't vote to remove him from the board. After I picked myself off the floor, I asked if they had contacted the police or an attorney, as this was a legal issue first, and only then a policy issue. Yes, he said, he knew they needed an attorney, but right now he needed to convince the rest of the board to remove this guy. Without a policy, the rest of the board felt sorry for the embezzler and wouldn't vote to remove him. So there he stayed, attending meetings and voting on organizational matters, months after the discovery had been made! As extreme as it appears to be, with no policies in place, the board was in a quandary about whether or not to remove their "friend."

If you are thinking this couldn't happen to your board, you might be surprised at

some of the bad behavior we have witnessed from otherwise rational people - behavior that seems to only show itself when they find themselves on a board. Without consistently applied board policies and procedures, it is more likely that your own odd sets of circumstances could knock your board (and your organization) for a loop.

### **9 No Board Training / Orientation:**

If the board has no orientation program, and new board members get little more than their board manual and perhaps a tour of the facility, you are not ready to recruit. Without training, how will that new board member know what is expected of him? And how will the organization be assured that their new board member is capable of guiding the organization?

**We've seen this:** We once gave a long-standing board a quiz about their organization, with easy questions like "What is your annual budget?" and "Name 3 programs the organization provides" and "Name one staff person aside from the administrative staff, and tell what their position is." They all failed. Many had been on the board for 20 years, and each and every one of them failed the quiz. How could they govern if they didn't have such basic information?

If new board members will not be well-enough informed about the organization from the moment they are permitted to vote, you are not ready to recruit until you can teach them to do the job. And if the organization cannot ensure that every single board member understands how to read the financials (not just those on the finance committee), so that every board member can be accountable for decisions that require financial understanding (like approving the budget, approving new staff positions, etc.), then you are not ready to recruit.

Want to see how your own board members measure up? Take our board quiz!

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### **10 No Recruitment Criteria or Process:**

This will sound ridiculously simple, but if you don't know what you are looking for in a board member, or you don't know how to qualify prospects once you find them, you're not ready to look! If you are willing to take anyone who is willing to serve, you are not ready to recruit. And if your whole recruitment process is to ask someone "Will you serve?", and if they say "yes," they're on the board - well you are nowhere near ready to recruit.

**We've seen this:** "Warm blood and a pulse." If only we had a nickel for every board who told us that is their recruitment criteria. If prodded, they might offer that they are seeking "business people" or "people with connections." On the other hand, when we ask what criteria and processes they have in place for recruiting their janitor, they rattle off a whole litany of qualifications and reference checks, etc. If our boards are accountable for everything our organizations do, shouldn't we have at least as good a process for "hiring" board members as we do for hiring the janitor?

If your board doesn't have a solid recruitment process that includes not only applications and interviews, but *first and foremost* knowing what you are looking for, then you are not ready to recruit.

For the #1 manual in doing recruitment the right way

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### **So if we shouldn't recruit, what's a board to do?**

The answer sounds simple, but it takes dedication and yes, it takes work. And that is to address the root cause of whichever of these 10 items describes your organization. If it is the lack of a solid board training program, develop one. If it is a lack of board policies, work to create those policies.

If the problem is that the board isn't functioning well, then perhaps they need to consider that the only training they've ever received for being a "director on a NonProfit board" has been to sit on other boards, where they also likely received no

professional training. Maybe it's time to train the folks who are accountable for everything the organization does - no, not just accountable for the money, but more importantly, accountable for making sure the community is a better place because your organization exists. Does your board know how to do that? Are they willing to concede that they may need to learn?

This approach may take a lot more effort, but it works. On the flip side, recruiting when you aren't ready is like having a baby to try to save a bad marriage. At best, your organization's problems will simply remain. At worst, the new recruits will feed into whatever isn't working, as the organization becomes more and more dysfunctional.

Our NonProfit organizations exist to make the community a better place to live. Our communities are counting on us. We owe it to them to address our problems head-on, and to become the very best we can be.

And once we're on that road, without a doubt, we will be ready to recruit new members to our boards.

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