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Recruiting Your Organization's First Board

(or, if you've already started, how to move on to your 2nd or "real" board)

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It seems like the worst of Catch-22's. We know that a board should be comprised of people who feel passion for our mission. But if the organization is brand new and doesn't have a following of passionate people, where does one start?

The method many start-up organizations use for that first board is to ask friends, family, and extended family to be their first board. For a small school, for example, extended family might include the parents of those first few students. What results is a small, close-knit group that, in the beginning, is both exciting and frustrating. And we figure that's the way it's supposed to be.

There is another way. It's a way that allows for you to create a strong, community-based board from the beginning.

If your organization already has that start-up board in place, don't fret. It is never too late to implement the methods that follow.

First, let's look at why it's not such a great idea to simply put your friends and family on the board. Then let's look at how to recruit a GREAT board from the start.

Why Recruiting Friends and Family Can Hurt Your Organization

It may seem logical during start-up time to recruit the people we know and trust, but that simple step can cause serious problems for your organization in both the short term and the long term.

- 1) In the short term, stacking a board with friends and family will make it VERY difficult to attract unrelated board members - the kind that can really help move the organization forward. With every organization in town competing for good board members, your board will not be as attractive to those prospects as a board that is comprised of a broad spectrum of the community.

This problem is a particular caution for small nonprofit or charter schools, who tend to fill their initial board with parents of students. These boards often become more of a PTA than a real governing board. Years after they could consider themselves a "start-up," these boards complain that even when they do attract a non-parent to the board, those new board members usually leave in frustration that the board can't get past acting like a PTA. And that cycle continues, on and on.

So it's best not to start something that will make it harder to recruit the kinds of board members you really want - the kind that will build the kind of board you want your board to be!

- 2) The second reason it is a bad idea to recruit friends and family is that it creates a long term problem - what is often called a "Founder's Board". A Founder's Board is a board that isn't really governing the organization - they are leaving that to you, the founder. Instead, that board is rubber stamping what you think should be done. After all, these are your family and friends. They want to support your efforts. They are certainly not there to create family feuds by suggesting you might not be right! (This is one of the many reasons unrelated board members will steer clear of a family-based board.)

A rubber-stamping Founder's Board may make things easier for the founder in the short term, but it is unhealthy for the organization in the long term. Why? It's simple: What if something happens to you? The organization won't have a board that can continue to ensure the mission is accomplished.

Two Steps To Creating a Great Board

There are 2 steps you can take now that can help prevent these problems from occurring down the road, helping you to ensure you will have a board that can do the job from the start. These are pre-recruitment steps that should be taken prior to the actual recruitment process, simply because yours is a new board.

The first step will help you find a pool of potential board members. The second is a GREAT way to avoid Founder's Board, allowing the organization to begin its life from a position of strength, right out of the chute.

Finding Potential Board Members

The question of finding potential board members is just like the question of finding funding. If you're new, how do you attract folks who can help?

Fortunately, the answer is the same for both. And that answer comes long before you file your 501(c)(3) papers. It comes long before your first grant request.

It starts with a feasibility study.

A feasibility study will answer the big questions that most board members AND funders will want to know.

- Should this organization even exist?
- Is there demand for the service we want to provide?
- Is there already something like this in our community?
- Could we find similar efforts to collaborate with, to make the whole stronger than we could ever be alone? If so, who would they be? And what should we know about them?
- What could our organization accomplish that maybe we haven't even thought about?
- Who would be likely to help us?
- And lots more - you are probably thinking of more questions right now!

The key to using the feasibility process to find supporters is to get the answers to those questions from anyone who might know about the issue you will be addressing. Government leaders and potential recipients of your services. Seemingly "competing" organizations and local philanthropists. Talk to anyone who might have an interest in what you are trying to do. And when you are done with each session, ask that person to recommend others you might talk to, who would also have an interest in your plans.

You will be surprised how easy it is to get in the door to talk with folks when ALL you want from them is their wisdom. DON'T ask for money. DON'T ask them to volunteer or to sit on the board. Just ask them for their advice, their years of experience, their expertise. (For more on the feasibility process, [CLICK here](#)).

At the end of this process, here's what you will have:

- A ton more information than you had before, upon which to base all the rest of your plans.
- A list of people who have been ignited by your ideas, who want to help you make it all happen!

Those are the people to consider for the pool of prospective board members as you begin the recruitment process. (For more on the recruitment process itself, [CLICK](#) here)

How to Avoid a "Founder's Board"

As the founder, you will obviously be the one to choose the first few board members, simply because there is no one else to do it! If you choose from the group you have spoken with during your feasibility work, you will have a great group to start with.

Once you have recruited the first few board members, though, there is a way to avoid stacking the whole board with your choices.

And that is for you as the founder to only recruit HALF the board members you will need. (As an example, if your board will eventually have 12 members, you will only recruit 6 or less of those board members. If you intend to be a board member yourself, count yourself in that 6).

Then leave it up to the board to recruit the rest of the board! Have them go through a solid recruitment process (like the one outlined in our recruitment article - [CLICK](#)), and they will choose from people THEY know, rather than the people YOU know!

The Results

Through this 2-step process, you will be creating a new board of directors that is really amazing from the start. Your board won't look like a start-up board, because they will be a broad-based coalition, and not simply members of your "family." (Note to schools: Interpret "Family" to mean "Parents".)

It takes more time to do it this way.

But as the founder of a nonprofit organization myself, I know the most important legacy I can leave my community is an organization that can live without me if something happens to me. And in my mind, that always makes it worth the extra time and effort to do it right.

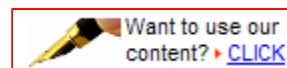


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