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Recruiting for Board Members

Process? What Process?

by *Hildy Gottlieb*

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If your organization is like most, you spend more time, money and energy recruiting for clerical and janitorial positions than for the position of board member.

When we recruit board members, we forget that we are "hiring" folks to do a job - one of the most critical jobs in the whole organization: leadership and governance.

So how can we improve the recruitment process? The first step would be to make sure you actually have a process!

Step One:

What are you looking for?

Whenever we do board development work, we start by asking the group what they are looking for in a board member. And without fail and only half in jest, each time we get the same response: Warm blood and a pulse.

I say only half in jest because one look at some of their board members will tell you that this has indeed been their selection criteria!

You can't find the right people to lead your organization if you don't know what you're looking for. Step One, therefore, is to establish criteria for selecting board members, so you'll know when you've found the right people!

Look for qualities that will help the board function better, do its job better.

Some examples may be:

- Understanding of our community and its needs
- Passion for our cause
- Willingness to commit time for board meetings, committee meetings, planning sessions, special events
- Team player - works well in a group
- Someone who listens well, is thoughtful in considering issues

The list will differ for each organization, and will change as the organization changes.

In cases where specific talents are needed, those talents should be considered IN ADDITION TO the qualifications you create for all board members. For example, the Finance Committee may be looking for someone who is financially savvy. If you find someone who knows a ton about financial matters but is a bear to be around, they are probably a poor choice. So look FIRST for the overall qualities, and SECOND for those specific talents.

Step Two:

Recruit a Pool of Candidates for Each Seat You Have Open.

You may have 6 seats open, but each one is its own seat. Recruit for them one at a time, seeking a pool of good candidates for EACH SEAT - just as you would for a paid position.

Traditionally, we seek board members by having someone suggest a prospect, whom we then pursue. We would never think to do that for our paid positions. We would use a competitive process in an attempt to find the very best choice.

Imagine having 10 great applicants for each of those positions! Imagine being able to pick and choose. Imagine saying, "We had 10 applicants and found 3 great candidates. Lets fill 3 of the seats, and then recruit for some of the others."

The change of mindset that occurs through this approach will help guide you when you face obstacles in this recruiting process.

Step Three: How to Recruit Prospects

Scenario A: Individuals suggested by the board are asked to apply

Most boards recruit by having existing board members propose names. The prospect is invited to fill out an application and attend a meeting or two, at which point they are asked to join the board. Truly, there is little decision-making as to whether or not they will fit. If they are willing (warm blood, pulse...), they are in.

Part of the reason for this is a perceived desperation on the part of boards to find members who are willing to serve. Another reason, though, is that once you have invited someone to join the board, even if you find out they would be a HORRIBLE board member, how do you uninvite them? Again, it comes down to lack of process.

And so when a board member is suggesting a prospect for membership, that referring Board Member should first be able to articulate why they think the prospect will fit the organization's qualifications criteria.

Then, when the prospect is approached, the person recruiting him/her should make it clear that the organization will be interviewing more than one prospect for the open board seat, and that you'd like them to apply.

Here's the difference:

a) George, I'm on the XYZ Agency Board. Will you consider being on our board?

VS.

b) George, I'm on the XYZ Agency Board. We are talking to a number of prospects for the board seat we have open, and you've been mentioned as a great prospect. Our recruitment process includes a number of steps, including an interview with the Board Development Committee. Would you consider putting in an application?

This approach brings a degree of control back to the board. Nothing is assumed. Prospects compete just as they would for any job. The decision of whether or not they are eventually invited to join the board is entirely up to the Board.

Scenario B: Individuals Come to You, Asking to Serve It is the rare board that never has to resort to Scenario A. But having potential board members approach the organization is certainly the preferable approach! What a pleasure to know they are interested, that their arm doesn't need twisting.

There are ways of seeking out these potential board members - ways we don't generally associate with recruiting for a board:

- Make it known you are looking! It seems obvious, but get the word out! XYZ Agency is recruiting for board members. Isn't that what you would do if you had a paid position open?
- In public speeches on behalf of the organization, let the crowd know that you are always on the lookout for good people who want to serve as volunteers or

board members.

- In breakfast clubs, networking groups, etc., when you have the opportunity to make announcements, ask for folks interested in helping the agency by sitting on the board.
- Advertise in your organization's newsletter, on your website - wherever you are asking for assistance.

Yes, people are pressed for time. They are overcommitted. They are trying to pare down.

But they also see sitting on a board as something one must be invited to do - something that happens only to those who are in the loop. You would be surprised at the number of organizations who have trouble recruiting good board members because people don't think it's a position they can aspire to. And the higher visibility the organization, the more people think you have to be well-connected to sit on their board.

So let the public know it's just not so. Your board is looking for qualified members. Get out and tell the world.

Step Four:

The Application Process - Get To Know Them as They Get to Know You

Again, think of this application process as you would if you were hiring an employee. You want to get to know the applicant just as they want to get to know you, all to determine if there is a fit.

Application

Lets start with the basics. Many organizations don't even have an application for board members. If that is your organization, create one. The application should ask about things you want to know. "Board meetings and committee meetings take up approximately 6 hours per month. Are you be willing to commit that amount of time to the board's work?"

Orientation

Most board members know very little about the organization they are being asked to govern. So while they are still in this application process, they should be given a good sense of what they are getting themselves into!

Create an introductory orientation program for BEFORE someone is appointed to the Board, to help them determine if they even want to be on the board! This program could be as comprehensive as having them attend a board meeting, tour the facility with a senior staff person and participate in a one-on-one interview with a board member just to answer questions. Or it could simply be a 20 minute video. However you do it, let this person know what's behind the organization they may be leading.

Interview

I hate to keep making the employee analogy, but would you hire a key employee for a leadership position without interviewing them first?

The Board Development Committee should use their list of desired qualifications to interview prospective board members. This is an excellent way to find out where they might fit into the organization, so they can hit the ground running if and when they are appointed. It is also an excellent way to find out if this is really not a great fit.

Step Five:

Now That They're On the Board

They've gone through the process and you've voted them in. Here are some steps that can make their transition to Board Member a smooth one, allowing them to hit the ground running.

Contract

Many boards require that Board Members sign a contract, formally taking on the responsibility of governing this NonProfit.

The contract can be as broad-brushed as a single page "I have read the board manual and know what's expected of me."

It can be as specific as "I understand that there will be one 2-hour board meeting per month, and 2 committee meetings per month (2 hours each), for a total of 6 hours per month. I further understand that there may be planning sessions or other board events that will require my time. I therefore commit to providing XYZ Agency with at least 100 hours in the year, to participate in these board-related activities."

In addition to providing the Board Member with a message that you are asking for a serious commitment, the contract can be used to directly prescribe board member behavior. If they sign the contract and then can't / won't abide the rules to which they've lent their signature, the board then has grounds for their removal.

Disclosure of Conflict of Interest

This has to be mandatory. It should be updated annually or whenever there is a change.

Orientation

Now is the time for the full-blown orientation. The purpose of this orientation is to provide new board members with enough knowledge about the organization and their role that they can immediately begin to govern.

What should be included in an orientation program is the subject matter for a whole other article. But the best place to start (if you don't already have a program in place) is to ask existing board members:

What do you wish you had known before coming onto the board?

What information would have enabled you to get up and running faster?

Recruit a great board



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Is there anything information you still would like to know more about, to be a more effective board member?

Put Them to Work

Once your board members have gone through orientation and are ready to participate, put them to work! Provide them with an array of activities and committees, and let them start helping the board and the organization!

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