

The Board Building Cycle

It is a scenario repeated all too often. Annual elections are coming up, the board hastily forms a nominating committee, and members scramble to find willing candidates to fill the open positions, often choosing less-than-ideal replacements in the interest of time.

But the job of building the board is more than just filling slots. It is about being strategic in the way a board looks at its composition and operations.

Rapid changes in the nonprofit sector have required that organizations take a closer look at not only how the business of the organization is conducted, but how decisions are made and by whom. The most effective boards - those whose members are deeply committed to the organization's mission, who bring expertise in key areas, and who represent diverse points of view - evolve over time through careful planning.

The departure of a key board member does not catch these boards off-guard because the process of identifying and cultivating potential candidates is ongoing. Traditionally, the committee that fills this role has been called a "nominating committee" and its charge has been limited to replacing departing board members. This article uses the term "governance committee" instead, broadening the group's scope and expanding its importance. This committee tackles one of the principal responsibilities of the board: to assure that the board continuously works to be as effective as it can be.

The governance committee is more proactive than the traditional nominating committee. That may mean recommending, due to a strategic shift in the organization, that a new board member with special expertise be brought on to the board. It could also mean asking another person to step down to make way for someone with different skill sets more appropriate to the growing, changing organization. It may mean taking notice of board malaise (waning attendance or declining discussions) and taking corrective action. Such action could include making a few phone calls, calling for an executive session, or conducting a board self-assessment.

The governance committee's work is vital to the health of the board and organization's work will bring results and that the organization uses time and time again.

The board building cycle:

Step 1: Identify the needs of the board: the skills, knowledge, perspectives, connections, etc., needed to implement the strategic plan. What do you have? What is missing? Identify sources of board members with the desired characteristics.

Step 2: Cultivate potential board members. Ask current board members, senior staff, and others to suggest potential candidates. Find ways to connect with those candidates, get them interested in your organization, and keep them informed of your progress.

Step 3: Recruit prospects. Describe why a prospective member is wanted and needed. Explain expectations and responsibilities of board members, and don't minimize requirements. Invite questions, elicit their interest, and find out if they would be prepared to serve.

Step 4: Orient new board members both to the organization - explaining the history, programs, pressing issues, finances, facilities, bylaws, and organizational chart - and to the board -describing committees, board member responsibilities, and lists of board members and key staff members.

Step 5: Engage all board members. Discover their interests and availability. Involve them in committees or task forces. Assign them a board "buddy." Solicit feedback. Hold everyone accountable. Express appreciation for work well done.

Step 6: Educate the board. Provide information concerning your mission area. Promote exploration of issues facing the organization. Hold retreats and encourage board development activities by sending board members to seminars and workshops. Don't hide difficulties.

Step 7: Rotate board members. Establish term limits. Do not automatically reelect for an additional term; consider the board's needs and the board member's performance. Explore advisability of resigning with members who are not active. Develop new leadership.

Step 8: Evaluate the board as a whole, as well as individual board members. Examine how the board and chief executive work as a team. Engage the board in assessing its own performance. Identify ways in which to improve. Encourage individual self-assessment.

Step 9: Celebrate! Recognize victories and progress, no matter how small. Appreciate individual contributions to the board, the organization, and the community. Make room for humor and a good laugh.