

How To Recruit New Board Members

The Better Your Board, The Better Your Organization

Scott Holdman, Pat Traynor, and David Hunnicutt

In their terrific book, *Forces For Good: The Six Practices Of High-Impact Nonprofits*, Leslie Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant state, “No discussion of nonprofit leadership would be complete without addressing the fundamental role of the board in leading an organization.”

We concur wholeheartedly.

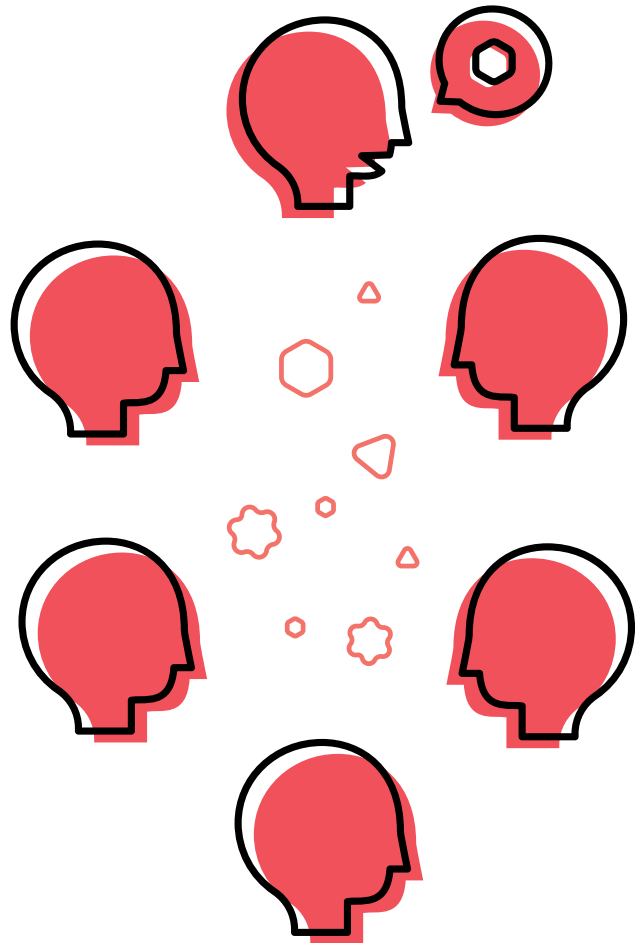
Indeed, time and again, researchers tell us that behind every high-performing nonprofit organization is a great board of directors. No doubt, the most significant challenge you’ll face is recruiting—and retaining—these folks over time.

In this article, we’re going to take a closer look at the particular roles great board members play and what you can do to attract top-shelf talent. To do this, we’ll present a number of specific strategies that will help you not only identify potential board members, but recruit and secure them as well.

As a result of reading this article, you should be better equipped to approach prospective board members and present a compelling case to close the deal.

The Building Blocks Of Great Boards

Before ever extending an invitation, it’s essential that you understand the basic roles and responsibilities that board members play. If you fail to start with this step, you run the risk of recruiting the wrong board members—which is actually worse than having vacant spots available.



In an insightful article entitled, “Ten Basic Responsibilities Of Nonprofit Boards,” Richard Ingram sets forth a comprehensive list of board responsibilities which include:

- Determine Mission And Purpose
- Select The Chief Executive
- Support And Evaluate The Chief Executive
- Ensure Effective Planning
- Monitor And Strengthen Programs And Services
- Ensure Adequate Financial Resources
- Protect Assets And Provide Proper Financial Oversight
- Build A Competent Board
- Ensure Legal And Ethical Integrity
- Enhance The Organization’s Public Standing

To be sure, this all-inclusive list is representative of the expectations that board members will assume when they join your organization.

The biggest challenge most nonprofit leaders encounter when presented with Ingram’s list is that it becomes a bit overwhelming due to the sheer number of variables that need to be considered when selecting the right candidates. And, generally, when leaders become overwhelmed the only decision they make is not to make one.

To simplify the board selection process, we propose better understanding your board’s roles by utilizing The Law Of Three W’s: One-third wisdom, one-third work, and one-third wealth.

Specifically, this means that one-third of your board’s composition will be comprised of those unique individuals who possess uncanny insight and sound decision-making characteristics. When in place, these board members can be relied upon to position your organization appropriately—which ensures maximum impact. What’s more, these astute souls also possess the talents and expertise to deal effectively with the various and sundry politically-sensitive issues that are guaranteed to arise as the organization attempts to advance its cause.

serve—these board members will not only lead through their generosity, but they’ll be able to call on others to contribute as well.

By using this simple approach, you can gain a much more streamlined perspective on the kinds of board members you’ll need to recruit in order to take your organization’s cause to the next level.

With this in mind, it’s time to turn our attention to the identification, recruitment and selection process.

“To bring things to a boil, you’ll want to make sure the right person from your board is appointed to approach your potential candidate(s). Make no mistake, who does the asking matters—a lot.”

The next third of your board will consist of people who inherently understand the nature of nonprofit work and how it should be executed. This group often includes CEOs and senior executives with backgrounds in operations, accounting, legal, marketing, communications, technology, etc. By having these individuals in place, you’re guaranteed to have a wealth of knowledge at your beck and call which can greatly assist you as you run the organization on a daily basis.

The final third of your board will consist of those individuals who have been blessed with the means (and desire) to support your organization. Because your nonprofit is charged with advancing the greater good—through the willingness of others to give and

Identifying, Recruiting And Securing Top-Shelf Board Members

Now that you have a better understanding of what it is board members actually do (and the three simple buckets into which they can be placed) let’s present some “best practice” strategies to help you secure the right board members for your organization.

BEST PRACTICE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY #1: Zero-In On Strengths And Diversity

Every board member brings a set of unique strengths to the table. In essence, these strengths can be classified into a few basic

⋮ AT-A-GLANCE

The Basic Responsibilities Of Nonprofit Boards



#1: Determine Mission And Purpose

#2: Select The Chief Executive

#3: Support And Evaluate The Chief Executive

#4: Ensure Effective Planning

#5: Monitor And Strengthen Programs And Services

#6: Ensure Adequate Financial Resources

#7: Protect Assets And Provide Proper Financial Oversight

#8: Build A Competent Board

#9: Ensure Legal And Ethical Integrity

#10: Enhance The Organization’s Public Standing

domains—thinkers, achievers and relators. Thinkers will be those board members who filter everything intellectually. They see the world in spreadsheets, data and concrete facts. Armed with this information, they begin to make sense of it and put it to work in advancing your organization’s cause.

Achievers will be those board members who view the world in terms of mountains-to-climb and “to-do” lists. They’re restless and eager to get things done. Nothing makes them happier

on ‘The Law Of Three W’s,’ you’ll also want to pay particular attention to making sure your board members have a diverse set of individual and collective strengths. Nothing’s worse than a board comprised of individuals who all think, talk and act the same.

That said, you’ll want to quantify your current board’s strengths (you can do this using a tool like the Clifton StrengthsFinder® by Gallup) and, based on the results, recruit board members to fill the missing gaps.

QUICK LOOK

Six Evidence-Based Board Recruitment Strategies

- #1: Zero-In On Strengths And Diversity
- #2: Identify Current Needs
- #3: Begin With Your Existing Board Members
- #4: Check Out Other Nonprofits
- #5: Have The Right Person Ask The Right Questions
- #6: Consider Using A Proclamation Of Intention

than having a long list of tasks and clipping them off one-by-one.

Relators will be those board members who rely heavily on their connections and leveraging existing social networks to make things happen. These individuals have a remarkable reach and are able to rally large groups of people almost effortlessly.

Here’s the thing: Each of these strengths is important—and it’s essential that all are represented on your board.

Similar to selecting board members based

BEST PRACTICE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY #2: Identify Current Needs

Another logical place to begin is by pondering these two specific questions:

- Where is our organization ultimately going?
- What kind of skills will we need to get there?

By formulating answers to these questions, you’ll be taking important steps toward identifying what the next member of your board will look like.

For example, if you have major mission-related activities looming on the horizon, you may want to focus on the individuals who can help you move the needles in those areas. Conversely, if you’re struggling to raise adequate funds, you’ll probably want to concentrate your efforts on pursuing individuals who can help you generate big bucks.

The bottom line is this: In order to attract and secure the perfect board members for your organization, you’ll first need to know where you’re headed and, then, what you’re going to need to get there.

BEST PRACTICE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY #3: Begin With Your Existing Board Members

If you’re looking for the most expedient way to identify, recruit and select new board members, the opportunity most likely already exists in your own backyard.

To be sure, your existing board members are a rich source of opportunity. Not only are they intimately connected with key members of your community, but they know the in’s-and-out’s of your organization as well. This combination makes for a very effective recipe for recruiting potential new members.

Wayne Luke, a partner at the Bridgespan Group believes, “The best way to uncover great potential board members is to enlist the help of your board’s difference makers, i.e., its most engaged, most active members.”

By approaching recruitment this way, you’re letting the world know you’re looking for candidates that mirror the habits and practices of your board’s best members.

Remember, these new recruits don’t have to be identical to your existing cadre—and it’s probably better if they’re not (this way you won’t fall prey to “group-think”). Still, you’ll benefit greatly by comparing your new candidates to the best-of-the-best already in place.

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BEST PRACTICE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY #4: Check Out Other Nonprofits

Yet another best-in-class board recruitment strategy is checking out the existing directors from other nonprofits in your community.

This is a ridiculously simple thing to do—you’re basically just a few Google searches away from identifying a whole host of individuals who have already proven they possess the right stuff to get the job done. Be warned however, there are a number of people who view this practice rather negatively in that it’s seen as something akin to “sheep-stealing.”

When pursuing this strategy, you definitely want to practice some discretion. Nevertheless, it is a viable—and highly-recommended—approach in that many nonprofits have term-limits for their

directors. As a result, these experienced and well-seasoned professionals turn-over on a regular basis. If you're sensitive to an individual's board term—and when they'll be cycling off—you may indeed land a wonderfully-qualified director to complement your existing players.

BEST PRACTICE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY #5:
Have The Right Person
Ask The Right Questions

To this point, you've concentrated your attention and efforts on better understanding the strengths and diversity needed to create a strong board. You've also identified the gifts and talents your board members bring to the table—and what's currently lacking. What's more, you've queried your existing board members in hopes of locating potential candidates. And, last but not least, you've checked out other area nonprofit organizations in search of directors' term limits in order to determine whether or not a soon-available candidate might be a good fit for your group.

If you've successfully checked the box on these items, we've no doubt that you've identified a suitable board candidate—and

perhaps even more than one. This is where it gets exciting—you're now officially cooking with gas.

To bring things to a boil, you'll want to make sure the right person from your board is appointed to approach your potential candidate(s). Make no mistake, who does the asking matters—a lot.

Ideally, the suitor will be your board chair or another high-ranking committee member. And, when they engage the candidate in initial conversations, it's important that things don't get moving too quickly. Remember, you can't un-ring the bell—it's almost impossible to undo a premature ask without hurting feelings and damaging relationships.

When it comes to securing new board members, you'll want to make sure you've developed a list of the most important questions you'll need to pose to any and all candidates. By asking the appropriate questions up front—before any formal commitment is made—you're ensuring there'll be no confusion between your expectations and their fulfillment of them.

To help you better conceptualize what this arrangement might look like, Bridgestar (a nonprofit leadership group) recommends asking all potential incoming board members four key questions:

- Can you fulfill our board's fiduciary and legal oversight responsibilities?
- How have you already demonstrated a passion for organizations like ours?
- Do you fundamentally have the time to serve on our board?
- Are you able to meet the board's fundraising requirement? (If the organization has one)

While not intended to be an exhaustive list, these four questions provide you with a great place to start.

By having the right person pose the right questions up front, you've taken an important step toward enlisting the best possible candidate(s) for your position(s).

BEST PRACTICE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY #6:
Consider Using A
Proclamation Of Intention

The final strategy in securing the perfect board member for your organization is to consider validating the entire exercise by employing a proclamation of intention.

Although it sounds square-cornered and a bit old-school, it is something that more and more experts are recommending. Indeed, by sealing the deal with the announcement of the individual's public intention to serve your organization, together you're proclaiming to not only other board and staff members but to the larger constituency as well, that you've reached an agreement to work together to advance the greater good.

By jointly signing this proclamation of intention, both you and your new board member are agreeing each has mutual responsibilities and expectations which will be willingly upheld. By employing this strategy, you've taken an important step toward maximizing your commitment to one another. What's more, you're both agreeing to abide by the principles of mutual respect and your board's by-laws.

When effectively instituted, a proclamation of intention can head off any potential misunderstandings and/or future acrimony. If,

for some reason, something were to go south, it's as simple as reviewing this document to remind each other that the high-road is the only legitimate option.

Importantly, this proclamation can be signed in a meaningful way by ceremoniously involving other board members and promoting it widely through your organization's communication channels as well as social media.

“In order to attract and secure the perfect board members for your organization, you'll first need to know where you're headed and, then, what you're going to need to get there.”

Parting Thoughts

In this article, we've taken a closer look at the particular roles great board members play and what you can do to attract top-shelf talent. In addition, we've presented six specific strategies that, if employed, will help you not only identify potential board members, but recruit and secure them as well.

As a result of reading this article, you should be much better equipped to approach prospective candidates and present a compelling case to seal the deal.

“By jointly signing this proclamation of intention, both you and your new board member are agreeing each has mutual responsibilities and expectations which will be willingly upheld.”

In closing, the opportunity to recruit and secure a new board member should be embraced with energy, enthusiasm and optimism. Indeed, one new addition—if properly vetted—can make an enormous difference in how your organization performs and functions. By following these six evidence-based recommendations, we’ve no doubt you’ll experience the success you need to advance your organization’s cause.

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