

Accelerating Board Members to Full Engagement

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About 40,000 nonprofit organizations start up in the United States each year. Most need boards, yet the pool of qualified, experienced, and passionate board members is not increasing at the same rate. The tendency to widen the search for board members and select less experienced directors is great to gain diversity, broader thinking, and new energy from younger people, yet it requires greater attention to board development.

One downside of recruiting rookie board members is that many say to themselves, “I’ll just sit and listen for the first year before saying or doing much.” Board leadership could improve immensely by accelerating board members to greater engagement and service in that first year, then deepening their engagement with the ministry throughout their relationship.

Here are some practical, proven tips to accelerate your board members, both new and long standing, into full service:

- **Start engagement in the recruiting process.** Don’t settle for warm bodies. “We are looking for people to serve on our board and wondered if you might be interested” is not an effective method of finding quality board members. Recruiting people with a track record of passionate support for the organization’s mission is critical. A personal commitment, if not calling, to the mission statement and values will pull the board member into the organization.

- **Recruit people to the right relationship, which may or may not be the board.** Compare these recruitment questions: 1) Would you serve on our board of directors? 2) Do you desire to engage our ministry more deeply? The second question focuses on motives of the heart and immediately fosters enthusiasm. This approach will motivate the potential board member more than the bare job description.

- **Avoid resume-builders.** Most ministry boards are a lot of work without much fame or glory, and certainly no fortune. Yet some prestigious ministry boards would really look good on a resume. If a person is likely to substantially gain in prestige and reputation by being on the board, he or she is probably not a good candidate.

- **Utilize an advisory board.** Implemented and guided properly, advisory boards with no formal power, but much influence, can be very helpful. Potential board members can often be found within those advisory boards as the board nominating committee observes their passion and actions. Those board members are prescreened in their motives and will come with a great awareness and understanding of the organization in their first board meeting.

. **Begin orientation before the prospective board member even agrees to be nominated to the board.** A potential board member should have a very good understanding of the mission, vision, role of the board and role of an individual board member at the respective ministry. Provide clearly stated expectations of service in terms of time commitment, scope of involvement, length of service, giving and fundraising.

. **Invite or even require the prospective board member to attend at least one board meeting before standing for nomination.** A prospective board member will grasp more through actually attending a board meeting than through reading a stack of documents prior to nomination. Likewise, the entire board will get to know the person and discern the potential fit within the board.

. **Consider moving the new board member between committees during the first year.** Where the board dips into operations (not recommended), it would be tempting to just insert the new board member in the committee of his/her greatest skills. However, more varied involvement could foster even better service in the second and ongoing years. You might find that a person who works in finance all day would greatly desire to be involved with program oversight, for example.

. **Make ongoing development and renewal a priority.** John Gardner, a former Presidential cabinet member and president of the Carnegie Foundation, suggests that leaders must always preach to the choir. The choir must always be able to sing the ministry's tune loud and clear lest the rest of the group get out of tune. One can train towards boardsmanship. Noted and current passion for the ministry should be a criterion for selection more than governance ability. Passion must be renewed throughout the term of service for each and every board member.

. **Help your board members bleed for the ministry.** This may involve a reduction in total commitments, as people cannot bleed for many organizations at the same time. It may also involve more hands-on work in your own organization. To accelerate your board members into full service, provide pathways for them not only to learn, but to participate in a meaningful way as volunteers and donors. Acceleration is not just a speed issue; it also involves depth of involvement.

. **Promote individual and group assessments.** Annual board member self-assessments can remind the board member of his/her commitments to the clearly defined board member job description. Board members who are not fully functioning will often recommit themselves to their role or might self-select themselves off the board. In either case, assessment done with grace can promote ministry engagement while leaving the venue of engagement open for dialogue as the ministry and individual's vision, passion, and resources change. Linked with self-assessments are overall board evaluations to determine strengths and weaknesses throughout the board as a whole.

. **Assure times of fellowship with other board members, staff, and those served.** Your ministry board member, selected properly, has joined because of passion. Fellowship helps the board member listen at the heart level. Passion creates passion.

Opportunities and invitations to participate add life to some otherwise lifeless governance meetings.

- . **Informally assign a longtime board member to nurture a less-experienced board member.** This will lower entrance tensions and provide an opportunity to understand more fully the board activities in a safe environment.
- . **Add special mini-sessions for new board members just before and/or after a board meeting to go over the agenda or the results of the meeting.** This is where most training for new members should be done.
- . **Surprising to some, the executive director/CEO should devote significant time to individual board members.** This is not a lobbying exercise but a time to instill a greater awareness and understanding of the values and passions of the ministry.
- . **Remember that special assistance may be needed for new board members that are out of the ordinary mix.** For example, a rural community ministry had a board of “downtown power types.” The board clearly had difficulty hearing and representing the voice of those being served (the moral stakeholders). It made sense to move some passionate, articulate neighborhood parents from the advisory board to the governing board. Yet none had any experience on a board, and they were intimidated by the thought of sitting side by side with “power types.” Training in boardmanship, along with some role-playing, allowed the new board members to enter their first meeting with a greater confidence to fully participate. Being linked individually to a long-term “power type” board member reduced the perceived class distinction. Fellowship before and after a board meeting allowed true friendships to be established between people with similar passions but different backgrounds.

Ministry board members are volunteers. As with volunteers in any role, their inspiration to serve comes from their heart. Acceleration to full service, then, must be through their heart rather than through more tasks and structure. Wise, experienced, passionate board members are a real gift to a ministry. Accelerating them to full service benefits everyone.

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