

## Winter 2004

### Board Selection Process Critical for Not-for-Profits

The board of directors plays an integral role in a not-for-profit organization's success. Perhaps nothing is as critical to a board's performance as its composition. By looking for certain traits in individual members, not-for-profits can increase the likelihood of effective governance.

#### **Need for a Broad Viewpoint**

Boards are facing greater and more challenging issues than ever before. The increased competition for funding, the need for greater transparency and uncertain economic times call for a board to understand broad perspectives and multiple viewpoints.

While financial and legal expertise remain important, boards also need members who represent a broad community perspective and can listen objectively, ask questions and bring common sense to issues.

Board members, however, need to bring some knowledge to the job, whether of their constituents, the organization's operations or the community. This knowledge makes it easier for a not-for-profit to seize opportunities, respond to adverse developments and plan for the future.

**Commitment.** First and foremost, not-for-profits must find board members who are committed — to the cause, to giving financial support and to working.

The importance of a personal commitment to the organization's cause, or at least shared values, can't be overstated. Look for evidence of personal commitment in a candidate's outside activities. While effectiveness on the board of another organization is no guarantee of equal success with your organization, it can signal an altruistic mindset.

Board members also must be willing to provide financial support. They can't very well ask others for contributions if they don't do the same. Further, they should be expected to go beyond the fund-raising and other activities of rank-and-file members and be held to a higher standard of performance.

**Collegiality.** Boards can't operate effectively without working cohesively, so look for members who enjoy working in groups and have a history of success doing so. Respect among individual members is key to resolving disagreements reasonably. That respect also must be extended to stakeholders outside the board, including members, financial supporters and staff.

**Understanding their role.** This requires more than just an understanding of fiduciary, financial and legal responsibilities. A stumbling block arises when board members try to micro-manage the organization's operations. Board members need to understand that the board's role is to govern; administration and implementation are best left to staff.

**Openness.** Effective board members are open to new ideas and believe that goals can be achieved in more than one way. They don't fear change or cling to the old

ways of doing things. Again, assess a candidate's openness by looking to other aspects of his or her life.

At the same time, though, strong board members aren't easily defeated. They have the courage to stand up for their beliefs, speak their minds and question others (respectfully, of course).

**Time.** As the saying goes, time is of the essence. Board members tend to be achievers with many responsibilities. But they'll need to spend more than just an hour or two a month to earn their keep. Beyond board meetings, members have committee meetings and work, public relations duties and donor meetings. Good board members can devote the necessary time to these tasks.

**Sense of humor.** While board members don't need to be the next Jerry Seinfeld, they do need to be able to see the humor in life and in random situations that may arise. A sense of humor also shows that a member can relax and doesn't need to take himself or herself too seriously.

### **The Ideal Board Member**

By taking some time and care in the selection process, organizations can increase the likelihood of finding members who identify with their mission, work well with staff and other members and make significant contributions to the organization.



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