

A newsletter designed to help you build strong member relationships, retain supporters and improve communication with your patrons.

July 2015

Turn Your Board Members into Association “Evangelists”

The members of your board play an invaluable role in strategic planning, policy development and financial oversight. If they are functioning effectively in these areas of responsibility, their impact will be profound.

There is, however, another contribution that board members are ideally suited to make if their powers can be harnessed for it -- the role of association “evangelists”. If the board selection process is done well, these are undoubtedly already some of your most capable team members, as well as being engaged, and having a lot of up-to-date knowledge about your operation. As a resource, they are just too good not to put into action “blowing your trumpet”. An impassioned board member can build credibility with your current audience and make exciting new connections for the future.

So, how can you be intentional about getting them in the game? Here’s a simple 4 step plan:

1. Cast the vision. Get your board discussing the impact that they can have as evangelists for the association, and brainstorming together about what this would entail. The ideal outcome is that you want every board member to own this as their responsibility. In future, part of your process for onboarding new members will be to convey the expectations you have of them as brand ambassadors. Over time it needs to become part of your board culture.

2. Create a message “toolkit”. Staff, volunteers and board members all need to “stay on message” when telling others what your organization is all about. So prepare a toolkit of printed and electronic resources that outline your mission, vision and progress. You should include lists of the services and benefits that you provide, current association statistics, and any success stories that can be used to interest and impress.

You should include brochures and business cards that board members can hand out to prospects, and you might even consider promo DVD’s or a powerpoint

presentation. The most basic inclusion in the toolkit, however, should be a summary of your brand message on a single sheet of paper that everyone can review quickly and regularly. Another great tool you can provide is to reduce the one page summary down even further to talking points on a small pocket-size note card.

3. Provide your board with training and motivation.

Plan some group activities to get everyone comfortable presenting your message by practicing in pairs or small groups. You could add a short 15 minute refresher activity to all of your board meetings to keep everyone sharp.

A great way to motivate your members to go out and do the evangelism is to set some goals. For example, each person could commit to making “x” number of new connections for the association before the next meeting. Then when the next meeting comes around, have board members report on their efforts, learnings and successes.

4. Get your board members to work as a coordinated team. It’s vital to have everyone report back on their activities. There is sure to be follow-up needed by staff members, and reporting can also avoid duplicated efforts. It’s also a good idea to provide regular opportunities for the exchange of creative ideas.

What if a board member doesn’t want to be an evangelist?

First you need to find out why. It could be that they don’t have enough contact with the kind of prospects who make up your target audience. Or, perhaps they are extremely busy in other roles and have very limited time.

You can then consider whether the value they bring to the board is substantial enough that you want their involvement at the level they can offer, even if they can’t be part of the team’s evangelistic efforts. There’s also the possibility that they can be involved in another way.

One more thing ...

Don’t forget to find meaningful ways to regularly

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thank your board members for all their extra efforts. It’s a good idea to plan an occasional celebration of the progress that is being made. Expressions of appreciation go a long way in maintaining that all-important motivation.

What your board members achieve in spreading the news and goodwill (outside the boardroom and between meetings) may even end up creating a greater return for your association than anything else they do. Getting this going may require an investment of time, especially in the beginning, but it has the potential to pay great dividends in the future.

LEADERSHIP

Big Numbers for Boards

Some key stats from a new survey by Deloitte and the Society of Corporate Secretaries and Governance Professionals:

BOARD MAKEUP

90%

The percentage of boards whose youngest member is over 40

86%

Have minorities on the board at a rate of less than 25 percent

15%

Have seen an increase in female directors in the past year

BOARD SIZE

87%

The percentage of boards that have between 7 and 14 members. In comparison, 5 percent have between 3 and 6, and 9 percent have 15 or more.

TECH UPTAKE

65%

Of boards communicate using an internal or external board portal

8%

Use social media channels associated with the organization

40%

Have discussed social media usage by employees or customers in the past year

associations **now**

<http://j.mp/10wXjJc>

Best Practices for “Onboarding”

- Assign new board members a “board buddy” to serve as a mentor for the first few meetings: offering a ride to the meeting, greeting them at the door, and sitting next the new board member can make a big difference in “first impressions.”
- Use name tags at meetings so that new board members can get to know their colleagues easily.
- Include a bio of all the other board members in the board orientation materials and if there is a statement of values or code of conduct that the nonprofit has adopted, be sure to share that also.
- Help new board members get “up to speed” by sharing minutes from the prior year’s board meetings, highlighting any important corporate action taken. However, rather than expecting them to read the materials, sitting down with a few of their colleagues who are willing to summarize the past year’s activities is more personal and can start building bonds.
- Host a special gathering that is purely social – creating personal connections and fostering trust and respect will bolster the board’s ability to have candid conversations and make tough decisions.
- Finding the right committee for the new board member can be helpful to ensure early engagement. Some people join boards to share their professional expertise. Others want to do something completely different as a volunteer from what they do in their everyday job.
- Structure board meeting agendas around important questions and strategic priorities so that the board is continually being asked to think about the future and see the “big picture.”
- Asking all board members to fill-out a self-assessment periodically is the best way to gauge engagement.
- Hold a discussion with your board to talk about their role as advocates.
- Revisit your mission: As time goes on, nonprofits should revisit their mission statement to ensure that their activities are still consistent with the mission – and that the mission has kept up-to-date with the direction of the organization.

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12 Characteristics of an Effective Board

An effective board is crucial for an effective association. Sound governance is as important as competent management. A good administrator will recognize the value of their board, and seek to work well closely with them, and help board members to excel in their roles.

The following 12 characteristics are not the only things that could be said about what effective boards do, but they will provide a solid starting place for evaluation and improvement.

1. High selection standards

This is something you cannot afford to rush or to waver on. It would be better to operate with a smaller board of truly qualified people while you wait to find the right candidates, than to settle for less than the best. Poor choices will dilute your board's effectiveness, slow you down, and can even lead to damaging conflict. For this reason you must see your nominating committee and/or process as absolutely critical to the future of your organization.

2. Diversity of perspectives

A lot has been written on the important issues of gender and ethnic diversity on boards, and it's certainly important to get those different perspectives. Even more generally, however, you should strive to also get as much variety of skill sets and experience as possible; ideally each board member should bring a unique contribution, and be valued for it.

3. An effective chair

Everything rises and falls on leadership, and at a "table of leaders" the chair must be a person who can command respect for their maturity and vision. Even though the board is comprised of volunteers, the chair needs to be able to both encourage members and also hold them accountable for a high level of performance.

4. Productive Board-Administrator relationship

The board-administrator relationship is a decisive key for a healthy organization. It must be protected and nurtured as a priority by all. If there is conflict, and it's allowed to deteriorate to the point that problems cannot be resolved, a change must be made; either the administrator needs to resign, or board members who cannot support the administrator should step down. Lame ducks and adversaries cannot be tolerated.

5. Well-prepared meetings

It's a reasonable expectation that board members prioritize attending meetings. If an absence is unavoidable, the chair or secretary should be notified in advance. Everyone should receive an agenda, financials and minutes of the previous meeting ahead of time so

they can be properly briefed and prepared. "Dashboard" reports are an excellent addition that can help board members quickly identify concerns for discussion.

6. Ongoing training and development

Board members should be helped to grow in their understanding of the organization, its work, and challenges. Ongoing education can be in the form of:

- Books and magazine subscriptions
- Video and audio resources
- Guest speakers at board meetings
- Study visits to similar organizations
- Attending conferences and seminars together
- Etc

There should be a line item in the budget, with funding set aside for this.

7. A culture of cooperation

Disagreements are inevitable, and good debate can be productive. A continually contentious environment, however, is another thing entirely, and it is not helpful. It's important to maintain a positive spirit of cooperation where members listen carefully to other points of view, and are committed to finding the best solutions together. When this is cultivated, the next important characteristic becomes possible:

8. Frank and open dialogue

A healthy spirit of cooperation does not inhibit free and honest exchanges, but rather it encourages them. Board members should always feel that they can contribute an opposing viewpoint, and that they will be respected and their point considered.

9. Level playing field

We've already made the point that diversity is a strength to a board, but that naturally means that some members will have more experience or education, or will have attained to higher responsibilities in their respective organizations. None of these things can be allowed to govern the weight that is given to some members' input over others. All ideas should be heard equally and evaluated on their own merits.

10. Strong work ethic

When candidates are being considered for a board position, expectations about the commitment involved should be clearly conveyed. Effective boards are hard-working boards; they don't just hear reports, they work together on strategic planning and policies, they have sub-committees and working groups to understand complex issues and provide helpful direction.

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MEMBER-CENTRIC COMMUNICATIONS

A newsletter designed to help you build strong member relationships, retain supporters and improve communication with your patrons.

12 Characteristics of an Effective Board

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11. Problem-solving attitude

All organizations encounter problems and obstacles that need to be overcome. This is unavoidable, and board members need to come to their roles with a “can-do” attitude. They must be ready to roll up their sleeves, apply their minds and skills, and hammer out solutions that the administration and staff can implement to move the organization forward.

12. Planned turnover

Finally, there’s a lot of discussion about “term-limits” for board members, and there cannot be one hard and fast rule on it. Each board must wrestle with the question in their particular context and determine what is going to be optimal. Two extremes ought to be avoided, however: (1) excessive turnover, and (2) interminable tenures that don’t allow for fresh perspectives. It takes time for a board member to become educated and “seasoned”, so effective boards retain a core of veteran members, while rotating in new blood. The bottom line is, in order to achieve this there needs to be a strategy in place for it.

So there we have 12 key characteristics to think about. Perhaps a good place to start would be to provide a copy to all your current board members for discussion.

Tomorrow’s greatest associations will have become such because they were led there by highly effective boards.

Book Review *“The Governing Board”* by Nancy Axelrod

This great little book is a very quick read, designed to be given to new board members to orient them to their key roles and responsibilities in advancing the mission of your organization.

Subject covered include:

- Legal duties of the board and board members
- 4 key overlapping roles
- 3 characteristics that distinguish great boards
- A fresh look at a “4-sighted” board
- 10 tips for board members

Nancy Axelrod is a governance consultant and founding president of *BoardSource*, who herself has served on many governing and advisory boards.

Copies can be ordered from the Center for Association Leadership website (<http://www.asaecenter.org/>). Quantity discounts are available.

Recommended!

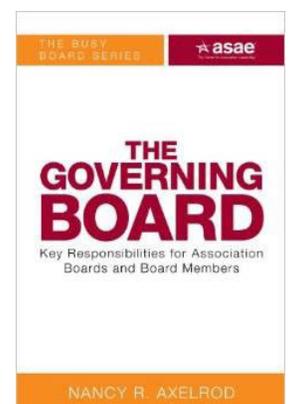
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www.asaecenter.org

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www.councilofnonprofits.org