

Board Development

Board Development: How to Identify, Recruit, Orient and Assess Your Board

Entire books have been written about the art of cultivating, identifying, asking, and nurturing a strong nonprofit board. While we can't get into all the details here, we have the following suggestions for the process of shaping your nonprofit's board into an effective force for good governance:

1. Find the "right" board member.

The recruitment process is really better described as a process of "cultivating" the interest of a potential board member until he or she is ready to accept an invitation to become a board member. Some nonprofits "test drive" potential board members by asking them to serve on a task force first or to volunteer for one of the nonprofit's programs. Others invite prospects to attend a board meeting as an invited guest. Need help finding the right board member? Contact your [State Association of nonprofits](#), local United Ways, and community foundations, any of which may sponsor or know about board-match programs in your area.

- Bridgestar has written a downloadable guide to [nonprofit board recruitment strategies](#), which provides helpful information to guide a nonprofit in the process of finding the right board members.
- Some advocate for using a board application form that individuals can fill out to indicate their interest in serving. More tips and discussion about recruiting board members are available from Carter McNamara's [Guidelines for Recruiting New Board Members](#).
- BoardSource resources: [The Board Building Cycle: Nine Steps to Finding, Recruiting and Engaging Nonprofit Board Members](#) by Berit Lakey (2007) and an e-toolkit, [Recruiting a Stronger Board](#).

2. Identify the person responsible for inviting prospects to the board.

It should be everyone's job to help identify potential new board members, but it is best if the actual invitation to join a board is extended only by those current board members who have been specifically authorized to extend an invitation. This usually happens after the "Board Governance Committee" (sometimes called the "Board Development Committee") has vetted a list of potential prospects and decided not only who should be asked but also who is the best person to make the ask.

- Thoughtful comments on the [process of recruiting new board members](#), and the downsides of making an "ask" prematurely, are shared in this article from Blue Avocado.

3. It's more than just a *nominating* committee.

Calling the committee that identifies new board members the "Nominating Committee" implies that its only function is to nominate board members for election to the board. Today, people recognize that nonprofit board service is about more than just being elected – it's about constantly learning about the organization, providing stewardship, and becoming the most effective problem solvers and policy-makers possible for the nonprofit. We suggest naming this committee the "Board Development Committee" or the "Board Governance Committee" because its focus should go well beyond nominating to encompass everything from evaluating the work of the board, to oversight for policies that the board uses to fulfill its fiduciary and legal obligations.

4. Onboard with vigor.

Bringing on a terrific board member is only the first step. Make sure the board member becomes engaged in the work of the board and feels that his or her time is well spent. 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 with the nonprofit. Others want to do something completely different as a volunteer from what they do in their everyday job, so make sure your new board member has an assignment that suits him or her well. Assign new board members a mentor and use name tags at meetings so that new board members can get to know their colleagues easily.

- The National Council of Nonprofits has developed materials suitable to share with board members at an orientation program or board meeting that uses humor to get them to focus on: [How to Be a Great Board Member](#).
- [Basics of board orientation](#) (BoardSource)
- [Sample board orientation checklist](#) (Chorus America)
- [Tips for effective orientations](#) (Assoc. of Gov. Boards of Universities and Colleges)

5. Prepare and develop board members beyond orientation.

Society expects so much from our volunteer board members – in turn we need to thoughtfully prepare and support them. Rarely do new members arrive on the board with years of experience in the nonprofit sector. Most often they will have only a passing familiarity with what a nonprofit is all about but lots of passion for the mission of your organization. Consequently, regularly educating your board members about their important role and about the nonprofit itself should be a high priority.

- Should you use a board member agreement? Read guidance from BoardSource about what typically is included in [board member agreements](#).
- More thoughts about "[board member contracts](#)" from the Best of Board Cafe.
- It's just as important to keep veteran board members informed as it is to properly orient new ones. Review this [Sample Table of Contents](#) for a board orientation manual that all board members will find useful throughout their tenure.
- Great board meetings take time to plan, but the rewards of sending out a great board packet will bring you immediate ROI! Read this article from Blue Avocado about what should go in the "[board packet](#)."
- Also, try inviting staff to board meetings periodically to make short presentations on a program area or current issue as a way to keep the board engaged and up-to-speed.

Additional Resources

- Review the Council of Nonprofits' online resources on [Diversity on Boards](#).
- Review and download sample tools such as benchmarks for effective boards, available from the [online library of Governance Matters](#).
- Review [job descriptions](#) for board members and officers collected by the Free Management Library.
- In this article Blue Avocado tackles a delicate question: [What to do with a board member who won't do anything?](#)

Also visit the section on Boards and Governance in the Council of Nonprofits' [online bookstore](#).