



Planning for nonprofits and philanthropy

Growing Your Board

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Too often, Nominating Committee conversation starts with: “Who do we know?” rather than: “Who do we need?” The conversation should focus on the experience, skills and connectivity to build a high performing board. Effective recruitment mimics the way paid positions are best filled in nonprofits – by defining the organization’s needs and identifying candidates to help meet them.

This primer offers a methodical approach to recruitment and onboarding in order to improve the quality and diversity of additions to your nonprofit board. The approach focuses on filling gaps rather than merely filling seats. The approach makes it more likely that your candidate accepts the invitation to join.

Assess your needs



- Clarify vision and goals.** Start with a clear vision for the impact you intend your nonprofit to have on its audiences, clients, members, and community. Set a series of goals for a three-year period. These are the building blocks of a strategic plan and are key to building an effective board because you need talented voluntary leaders to help realize your nonprofit’s vision and fulfill your goals. Ask: *What knowledge, abilities and connections do we need?*
- Identify gaps.** Use a simple board matrix as your planning tool. (Excel works just fine!) Begin with a column-long list of the expertise you need to populate your board (e.g. legal, accounting, marketing, media relations, architecture, engineering, event planning, fundraising, government relations...the list can be long!). Then fill in the names of current board members who meet the criteria. The cells left blank – no current name to match the need – are the gaps you’ll need to fill.

Expertise	Trustees		Tenure			Committees				Gifts			Demographic		
Skill/Rch	Name	Role	Class	Yrs	Trms	Ex	Gv	Dv	Fn	2014	Ask	Solic	Geo	Gnd	Rel
Mkt	Jan D.	Pres	05	10	4	x				5k	7k	Jon	W	M	J
Finance	Jon D.	Treas	11	4	2	x			x	25k	30k	Bob	E	F	M
Prospects															
Edu.															
Legal															

NOTE: A sample board matrix is available at <http://www.planaadvisors.com/library/>

Good additions to your board need not be people you already know; strong board candidates will respond to an unprompted overture when they're asked to lend their unique talents and abilities – just as many of us would respond to a call from an executive search firm with a job prospect too good to pass up.

- **Create profiles.** A gap analysis will pinpoint deficits in your board's composition – gaps in skills and expertise; social, political and business connections; community representation; and financial resources. Use the list of gaps to create profiles of the kinds of individuals you need which will guide the research you'll conduct to find candidates – just like an executive search firm would do.
- **Find prospects.** Search for potential board members who can fill the gaps using all available resources. Scour your own donor list and lists of top contributors to similar nonprofits. Consider prospects from amongst your vendors. Have conversations with employees, fans, friends and family sharing your recruitment criteria to see who they know. Query professionals familiar with your nonprofit (e.g. your accounting firm). Read the local business newspaper (e.g. Crain's in New York) to surface candidate names. Have conversations with colleagues at organizations that have a vested interest in your success (e.g. UJA-Federation, United Way, Catholic Charities). And...that's just a start.

The pressure to diversify a board’s membership is heightened today. It may be a precondition for funding from certain sources. It is also, simply put, a better, more inclusive, more productive and effective way to govern. But what do we mean by diversity?

Demographics. Diversity on a nonprofit board typically means its demographic mix, including but not limited to ability, age, class, country-of-origin, ethnicity, gender, race and sexual orientation. Diversity should be calibrated to the nonprofit’s mission and the people, community, or issues it serves.

Defining Diversity. On a nonprofit board, diversity should be defined more broadly than race or other demographic characteristics, because focusing solely on the identity of a board member or prospect can be a form of tokenism. True diversity – which includes Intellectual and experiential diversity – brings different modes of creative thinking, problem solving, access and strategy to a board – all of which can be important to discussion, debate and success.

Finding Diversity. Demographic, intellectual and experiential diversity often go hand-in-hand. By filling gaps in experience, expertise, field and access, boards are better prepared for effective service. Diversity comes from finding board members whose lived experience differs from that of fellow members. Diversity comes when we welcome people from different cultures and communities, educational and professional backgrounds, socioeconomic experiences, and ways of working, living, loving and communicating than the majority on a typical nonprofit board.

Just like soliciting a major gift, asking someone to join your nonprofit board follows thoughtful cultivation over an extended period of time. Be patient and plot out smart steps.

- **Establish a pipeline.** Begin longer-term cultivation of prospective future board members in a less targeted way. Engage corporate volunteers through partnerships (e.g. banks, media companies, developers...). Set up a junior board. Populate appropriate committees with non-board members so they've got a way to get engaged before you ask for a more formal commitment (and to test their leadership and performance).
- **Ask for a date.** You might invite a strong candidate to an informal get-to-know-you over coffee, one-on-one, with a member of the Nominating Committee. Highlight the reasons you've reached out. In general, candidates are more likely to respond when they come to appreciate that they are filling a gap and providing knowledge, skills or connections otherwise absent.
- **Cultivate.** Invite the prospective candidate for a tour, or to see a program in action. Have them meet the CEO and another board member over lunch. Introduce the prospective candidate to other members of the board and staff by extending a complimentary invitation to a forthcoming gala or event. Share information that provides a broad overview, such as recent financials, annual report, strategic plan and marketing materials.

Good boards are purpose-built to support the organization's vision for the impact it wishes to have, which requires cycling on new board members who have the skills, the knowledge and the reach to aid the organization in achieving its goals and realizing its vision. To do so, board members must clearly understand their responsibilities, typically laid out in a board job description enumerating them, so there is clarity around the role.

- **State expectations.** Give the candidate a copy of the board job description to review. Reinforce the contents in conversation along with your invitation to join the board. Clearly indicate performance expectations: meeting attendance, financial obligation and committee participation are three areas that should be explicitly discussed as part of the “ask.”
- **Invite formally.** A letter of invitation signed by the board chair and the CEO makes the process of joining a board a more formal affair and allows you to attach another copy of the board job description and restate key expectations in writing.
- **Promise evaluation.** Good boards evaluate the overall performance of the board each year as well as the performance of individual board members. Sharing a copy of the evaluation tool that you use to assess individual board members' performance each year gives the Nominating Committee cover if they choose not to recommend re-election if the individual's participation is a disappointment.

Imagine what it feels like to show up at your first meeting as a new board member wondering: Who are the players? What are the issues? What should I say? Where should I sit? An effective onboarding process that provides orientation and training for newly-elected board members can make each a productive participant from the beginning.

- **Review.** Ask new board members to thoroughly review the board handbook, which should include a range of materials from by-laws to bios, policies to program descriptions, and a copy of the Directors & Officers Insurance policy.
- **Orient.** Develop a standard orientation procedure. Include a tour of facilities; sit-down sessions with key program, operations, marketing and development staff; a close look at the budget and financial statements with the CFO; and an introduction to fellow board members.
- **Mentor.** Each new board member might be paired with a veteran who can serve as a mentor. The veteran should provide a personal overview of the organization and his/her experience as a board member in advance of the new member's first meeting. Having someone familiar to sit near at that first meeting, and periodic phone calls to review issues and answer questions, will help with acclimation.
- **Engage.** The chair might assign a short-term project to a small group of new board members. The project 1) encourages the new members to develop camaraderie, 2) tests their capacity to perform effectively on behalf of the organization, and 3) quickly establishes a track-record of contribution that others on the board will note.



About Us

Plan A

Advisors

Plan A was founded in 2013 by Evan Kingsley and Adam Gaynor as a new kind of **consulting** practice to design and facilitate **individualized** approaches to the unique needs of clients, their audiences, leadership, and financial and organizational platforms.

Together they have more than **40 years of experience** in nonprofits, social enterprises, philanthropy and organizational development across the **widest range** of organizations, institutions and philanthropies.

Plan A works with the **board and executive leadership** of agencies, institutions, organizations and funders to design the most **effective and efficient paths** to setting and meeting **realizable goals**, driven by a **strong and compelling vision**.

Plan A projects include **strategic and business planning, governance, mergers and fundraising**.



Ready to set an introductory meeting? Please get in touch. We welcome your inquiry and take great pride and pleasure in guiding you and your organization to the right solution for your needs.

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