

Time to “Build the Board”: Now What??

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It’s a familiar story: the board meeting is feeling a little lackluster. The same few people are doing all the work, and attendance by others is lagging. The board lacks people with the expertise it needs, or people who “know people with money.” And *everyone* is sick of worrying about fundraising. There is only one conclusion: it’s time to build up the board!

Most boards in this situation immediately start thinking about what kind of new people they need to recruit. This is often followed by a sense of despair: does anybody even know these people? And if so, how on earth can we get them to say they’ll join?

The truth is, you *do* know people: colleagues, clients, neighbors, acquaintances -- and those people all know other people you could potentially tap as well. For most boards, the real problem is not that you don’t know people who would be wonderful, it’s that you are fairly sure those wonderful people won’t agree to join up. Furthermore, asking someone you really like to join a board that is tired and stuck does not feel like a kind thing to do.

“If you build it, they will come.”

When it comes to building your board, I believe that the place to start is not with the Rolodex, but with a serious look inward. Let’s face it: if board meetings are interesting, inspiring, and productive; if board members feel their talents are leveraged and their time is not wasted; if people feel they are moving the organization forward and learning and having fun in the process – if all these things are true, people will want to join your board. More to the point, your board members will be out in the community telling others what a great experience they are having, and will not need to be prodded to invite others in. Thus, the real solution to recruiting great board members is to *create a board that people genuinely want to join*.

Now admittedly this creates a bit of a chicken and the egg problem, because if you need new people to energize your board, and you need an energized board to bring on new people, where do you start? You start by fixing whatever is broken on your own board. You do this by looking very honestly at what is working for your membership and what is not, and by not being afraid to make changes. The beauty of this approach is that the process itself will help to jump start a flagging board, as people feel newly empowered to create the kind of group they want to be a part of.

What do Board Members Need to Be Successful?

To have a great board experience, all board members need three basic things:

1) Board Members need to be inspired by the mission of the organization.

People joined the board because they care about the important work you do: serving midwives, families and babies. Board members need to be given opportunities to see or

hear about the work of the organization on a regular basis in order to stay connected to their passion. This can happen by observing a class, hearing a presentation from a faculty member, or meeting a client. How powerful would it be to hear a first-hand account of a student midwife's first birth? One board I know puts children's faces on the bars of the bar graphs in the financial reports, so readers never forget why they are thinking about the budget.

Since it is a passion for the work of the school that inspires people to volunteer, board members must be given opportunities to work on substantive issues relating to the direction, mission and vision of the organization. It is tempting to let the staff do the "real" decision making, while the board OK's the budget and runs the fundraisers. Boards like this will never be truly engaged; nobody wants to be a rubber stamper. Great boards have meaningful discussions about important issues every time they meet.

2) Board Members need to have a clear understanding of what needs to be done, and be given the education and skills to carry this out.

There is no particular reason that a smart person who is passionate about birth choices should love fundraising or be an experienced strategic planner. Most great board members are made, not born. They must understand exactly what is expected of them, and be given as much training and support as they will need to do it well.

As an example: for most boards, it's not enough to say, "Invite your friends to our benefit auction!" People will feel anxious about the task and put it off. Instead, take time to brainstorm about what kinds of new people might be interested. Do board members need a chance to role play inviting friends, or be given sample text they can email? Most importantly, how are they feeling about doing this task? They may need a check-in call from development staff, or, if there is no staff, they can buddy up and check in with each other so they feel supported in doing something which is hard for them, but still accountable to the task. Breaking down the work and providing opportunities to learn, practice, and be celebrated for a job well done, will help people move out of feeling stuck.

3) Board members need to be supported and appreciated for what they are: volunteers

We all know that life is tremendously busy and there are many competing demands on our time. When people give up family and leisure time to put hours in volunteering for your school, they shouldn't just feel good about it . . . they should feel GREAT about it! They deserve to feel that their time is well spent, which means that they need real accountability from staff and board colleagues, so all the work does not fall to a few people. They deserve to be comfortable as they carry out their work – no more board meetings on terrible folding chairs! They deserve to have fun, learn something, and feel inspired at every single board meeting. And they deserve to be thanked and appreciated for all the work they do, by the staff and by each other.

At organizations with very tight budgets, it can feel indulgent to invest in the “care and feeding” of your volunteers. Of course, not all of the things you do on behalf of the board need be expensive: one board president I know awards “Queen for a Day” at each monthly meeting, and gives that person a tiara to wear throughout it. But even if money is tight, I would argue that spending some money to help your board function better is a wise investment. One organization with a board comprised mostly of moms found that when they spent the money to provide a simple meal and a teenager to watch kids in a separate room during their meetings, both attendance and morale was vastly improved, and the cost was really quite reasonable. Your board members are your greatest assets – protect them!

Evaluate what’s working and what is not, and don’t be afraid to change

Every board will benefit from an honest evaluation of what is working and what is not. Written surveys are a good start, but brainstorming sessions and 1:1 meetings are also effective tools for gathering information about how people are feeling about the board.

It is important to realize in this process that the board has a lot of latitude to make changes in how it runs– there are very few legal requirements about how a board should work, although some changes may require an amendment to your bylaws. If you’ve always had evening meetings but people are burnt out by the end of the day, try switching to breakfast meetings and see if the energy changes. If you have a small board and are finding it hard to get all the tasks done, consider doing more of the work on the committee level and inviting non-board members to join you. And if everyone is sick of working on that annual fundraiser that is such a tradition at your school, maybe it’s time for some creative new event ideas. The point is to question every practice that is based on “but we’ve always done it that way . . .” if it is not really working for your board now.

Every Meeting like a Mini-Retreat

Surveys show that most board members enjoy retreats, with chances to get to know one and other and more time for in-depth discussions, much more than they enjoy regular meetings. So how can you make your regular board meeting more like a retreat? Keep committee reports and other one-way communications that could be written to a minimum, and add in time for short trainings, substantive discussions, and team building. Break-out sessions, where people discuss an issue in small groups, can wake up a slow meeting and encourage the quieter members to get engaged. There are plenty of well-researched tools for running more efficient and effective meetings – use them!

“If you keep doing what you’re doing, you’ll keep getting what you’re getting.”

There’s no question that recruiting new board members can give your school’s board a shot in the arm. But if your board is not getting the “care and feeding” it needs on an ongoing basis, it will only be a temporary improvement. If you get your own house in order first and focus on building a truly dynamic board, you will have laid the groundwork for bringing on the committed people you need to make your organization thrive.