



5 Questions Nonprofits Should Ask Themselves About Prospective Board Members

In a recent New York Times article about museum boards and their relationship with wealth and status, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, urged museum directors to re-evaluate the criteria they use to select trustees in a manner consistent with their missions, a suggestion that I made in an earlier posting that proposed ways for nonprofits to mitigate potential backlash related to both their boards and wealthy donors.

There are myriad books, articles and postings advancing selection criteria for board members for both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Many of these emphasize traits traditionally associated with philanthropic work like “passion for the mission” and “generosity” for nonprofit boards, but business-minded skills like “innovation” and “problem solving” for for-profit ones.

I think nonprofits should take a cue from for-profit boards and search for individuals who can actually help guide the institution rather than just support it. That’s not to say that “giving and getting” aren’t important for nonprofit boards – they are – but there’s more to governance than money. So, here are some suggestions of questions to consider in order to attract board members who can make a difference in the strategic direction of the organization:

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- **Is this individual a strategic thinker and problem-solver?** Today’s nonprofit organizations are extremely complex enterprises, and the challenges they aim to solve are increasingly complicated. They require the same kind of critical analysis, creative thinking, innovation and strategic planning as their for-profit counterparts. It’s too much to expect that this kind of thinking, planning and problem-solving can exist in just one or two people at the head of the organization. Board members must and should be deeply involved with fleshing out answers to difficult and challenging questions alongside their CEO and senior staff people. While some affluent individuals may be able to assist in constructive ways, wealth in and of itself is not an indication that this critical skill is present.

- **Is this individual one who will challenge the status quo or blindly embrace it?** In order to move forward, nonprofit organizations need individuals who will challenge the “old” way of doing things, suggesting new approaches and exposing current weaknesses. Too often, nonprofit boards consist of individuals who simply go along with the wishes of their founder or CEO without really challenging current assumptions and posing new ideas. Board meetings can be full of nodding heads rather than raised hands. Nonprofits should strenuously guard against this kind of “get along by going along” attitude of their boards.

- **Does this individual strongly embrace the mission and vision of the organization?** As I’ve written before, I think “passion” is over-rated – it ebbs and flows and ultimately fades – while strongly held beliefs often endure. Nonprofits should seek prospective board members who are committed and rational believers rather than those who are simply excited about a cause. Embrace purpose rather than passion, and allow alternative suggestions on “how” to better serve the mission and vision of the organization rather than encouraging blind allegiance to it.

- **Does this individual represent a diversity of experience, background or point of view?** The worse thing for any nonprofit board is to be homogeneous in appearance, skills, work/life experience and thought. Nonprofit organizations should embrace diversity and inclusion, and be serious about including individuals who can represent the interests of those people the organization is trying to serve. While it’s human nature for board members to attract their friends and business colleagues to join them on boards, nonprofits have a special obligation to reflect the communities where they live and work.

- **What value does this individual bring to the board besides money?** While contributing and fundraising remain critical functions of a nonprofit board, if those are the only reasons an individual is being considered for membership, there are probably better ways to engage them in the work of the organization than serving on the board. Boards of nonprofits are charged with governing and monitoring the practices of the organization, ensuring that it is operating in accordance with its stated mission, and planning for its long-term sustainability. This takes the kind of commitment, leadership and practical experience that goes beyond simply contributing and raising money for the institution. Nonprofit organizations should expect more of their board members than simply writing a check.

The key to success in any organization is surrounding the CEO with smart, energetic, committed and creative people who will help move the institution forward through thick and thin. The stronger an organization’s board, the more likely it is to take advantage of opportunities, avoid pitfalls, discover efficiencies, and embrace innovative approaches. By asking a few simple questions about prospective board members, nonprofits can avoid the appearance of only embracing affluent and homogeneous governing bodies and ensure more strategic and inclusive enterprises.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/timothyjmclimon/2019/10/07/5-questions-nonprofits-should-ask-themselves-about-prospective-board-members>