

“It Begins with the First Conversation” The Key to Successful Board Growth and Succession

By Louis M. Markwith, Senior Counsel

Board Succession is an important issue for all organizations, public or private. Many times in the nonprofit business, the Board is focused on succession planning of the staff, especially the CEO. However, the most important factor in the overall success of a nonprofit business is succession planning for the leadership and membership of the Board, itself. A successful recruiting and training plan of Board volunteers will lead to strong leadership among the officers of the Board. Therefore, the **“first conversation”** that occurs with a potential Board member is critical for the candidate to understand your organization’s objectives and to set the stage for successful board recruitment and involvement.

In our firm’s board training refresher module, we often throw in this set of letters: **“NOIABTIBWITB.”** We ask people in the training to guess what this means. It is the basis of an old adage: “No Organization Is Any Better than Its Board Wants It to be.” How good does your Board want to be?

A fundamental discussion needs to happen within the Board, each year. The Board should ask themselves the following questions:

- If this organization did not exist, would someone, or some group, invent it to meet a need on our society?
- If yes, does the organization remain relevant related to their mission, vision, and planning?
- What types of talents are needed to insure these things can be achieved?
- Which talents do we have?
- Which additional talents need to be acquired?

The Board is responsible for the successful perpetuation of the organization. Getting back to the original premise of the **“first conversation,”** their success rests squarely in the process of **identification, cultivation, education, and retention** of the very best talent available. The Board should be seeking individuals who can fulfill the Board’s “trustee responsibilities” as:

- Policy Makers who create the framework for an effective operation
- Stewards who safeguard the financial condition
- Ambassadors who expand the reputation and reach into the community
- Builders who guarantee the resources through effective fundraising.

Building the talent base is a continual process that rests with the entire board.

Have you ever heard this? “Its six weeks before the annual meeting and we need to fill spaces on the board. We have four slots to fill. Who can we get?” This is not a succession plan. In using this recruitment process the adage is that “the organization gets the board it deserves.”

If that is not what you desire for your organization, read on.

The Board renewal and growth process should be active year round; it should be a top priority of the board leadership. This function is usually handled by a Board Development Committee, Governance Committee, or a Nominating Committee. However, this remains a responsibility of the full Board.

The Board needs a clear understanding of your vision and mission, along with a clear understanding of your strategic plan. Then it is time to complete a grid to assess the current talent available, the expected losses over the next two to three years, and the additional talents needed to fulfill that bright new vision your board has. From this process, the Committee will know the types of individuals the organization will need in a set period:

- Vital skills that will be lost: for example, financial management, legal, marketing
- New skills: for example, new leadership potential, fundraising, strategic thinkers, well placed centers of influence in the local area, state, or nation

Now your organization is ready to recruit from a position of strength. You are ready for that “first conversation” with potential Board candidates. You know your mission, vision and plan and can articulate to a prospective Board Candidate why their special talent is needed and how their involvement will be meaningful to them and to the people your organization serves. Steps:

- Develop a large pool of names of multiple people who have the special talents and skills you seek. The pool will need to be refreshed, constantly, as everyone you ask will not say yes. (Adding new names is the responsibility of every Board member.)
- Determine who knows this person and is willing to assist with an introduction. (You may not know them but know of them.)
- Select the Contact Team (always more than one person) who will attend the initial meeting and follow-up sessions. The Executive Director or CEO should be a member of all Contact Teams
- Set the appointment and prepare basic organizational materials that describe who your organization serves and why; mission, vision and plan for the future.
- Make the initial visit. This is the “**first conversation.**”

- a) Explain that your organization has a solid track record of success in its service arena and explain the vision of the future.
 - b) Explain that the individual has been identified as one who can bring additional strength to the Board and the organization.
 - c) Ask the candidate for feedback on your presentation and answer questions.
 - d) Ask for names of people the candidate may know who may, also, have an interest.
 - e) Commit to follow-up date
 - f) Send a thank you note, each member of the Contact Team.
- Follow-up until you have the commitment you want or determine there is not sufficient interest to continue.

When you have the commitment, **nominate**, **orient**, and continually **educate** and **involve** the new board member.

Send and email to: markwith@dewittandassociates.com to request the following supporting documents:

- a. Board Development Committee Annual Work Plan
- b. Candidate Tracking Sheet
- c. Board Profile Worksheet
- d. Committee Assignment Grid
- e. Creating a Pool of new Committee and Board Members