

***“Making the Best Use of Your Board’s Talents”***

By Brydon M. DeWitt, President

There are no more important volunteers for your nonprofit than the members of your Board. What they understand about the organization and the particular reasons they have been asked to serve will determine your success in fulfilling your mission.

In the previous issue, the point was made that careful succession planning for your Board is critical in recruiting future members who will be able to move the organization forward. It is just as critical to spend time with current Board members to maintain and strengthen their ownership of your nonprofit. Building and keeping a strong Board must be an active part of the CEO’s operating agenda, as important as the daily management of the organization.

If properly and thoughtfully done, each member of your Board was identified and recruited because he or she brought something significant to the nonprofit – market penetration, professional knowledge, financial skills, etc. However, once a part of the Board, the chair and CEO must make certain that these attributes are suitably utilized. When they are, Board members feel that they are contributing, and the bond between them and the organization grows stronger. If neglected, frustration on the parts of the CEO and members of the Board is often the result. Whenever the complaint about the Board comes from the chief executive, it is usually because the Board or a number of its members have not had the correct assignments nor had the necessary amount of attention. As Shakespeare wisely noted (paraphrased, of course), “The fault may lie not in our stars (our Board members), but in ourselves.”

Fortunately, there are fixes for these “attention deficit” problems, but the CEO must be convinced and committed to plan and follow through.

- Schedule a one-on-one meeting at least once a year with each member of your Board. Over breakfast, lunch, or coffee, ask about the member’s experience with the Board and the organization. What is most rewarding/frustrating? Is the member happy with his/her current Board assignment? How might Board meetings be improved?
- Encourage the chair of the Board to be in regular contact with the members. Sometimes, it may be productive to bring the chair with you in the individual meetings. This can reinvigorate a Board member who may have been wondering about his or her usefulness and importance.
- Between the one-on-one meetings, telephone each Board member to stay in touch and/or get advice on an issue in a member’s area of professional expertise.

The Committee on Board Affairs (Nominating Committee, Governance Committee, etc.) should be used to its fullest extent in building and keeping the Board strong and healthy. Too often, this committee sees its role only as a nominating body instead of understanding that it can be the most important committee of the Board. This “Board Wellness” Committee should:

- Schedule annual Board workshops to remind members of their roles, conduct a Board self evaluation, and set goals for coming year that will enable Board growth and strengthening.
- Annually review the Board job description. If it needs to be changed, do so and bring it to the full Board for discussion and approval. This is also a good time to examine how your Board is organized. Do you have the committees necessary for the Board to do its job of providing oversight of the budget, program, fundraising, and public relations? Do the memberships of these committees reflect the knowledge, skills, and interests of the Board member assignments?
- Thoroughly analyze the makeup of the current Board. There are matrices available that will help show the strengths of Board members as well as the weaknesses that can be addressed through the recruitment process. With this clearer picture, priorities can be established for prospective Board members.
- Insist on a formal nomination process that is managed by the Committee on Board Affairs. Since the identification, cultivation, and recruitment of Board members must be thorough and serious, so must the methods of proposing prospective members. All nominations should be made in writing with a clear statement about the reasons for the nomination. The entire process from identification through invitation should be managed by this committee.

Our firm has forms and other documents that may be useful to you as you work toward strengthening your Board and your organization. Please let us know if you want any or all of the following by sending an email to [bdewitt@dewittandassociates.com](mailto:bdewitt@dewittandassociates.com).

- Board job description
- Board profile matrix
- Committee on Board Affairs job description
- Board organization chart
- Board self evaluation
- Information on a Board Refreshment and Planning Workshop