FRIENDS IN FOCUS

Best Practices: Board Recruitment & Retention

Introduction

An active and engaged board is essential for any nonprofit, and even more so for all-volunteer organizations. Yet it is often difficult to identify new board members who can bring much-needed skills, ideas and energy to the organization. Below is a compilation of successful strategies used by Friends groups, as well as tips and strategies from nonprofit experts. Taken as a whole, the recommendations provided in this fact sheet form a board recruitment and retention plan.

Pre-planning

Establish a Nominating Committee

The Friends of Lorenzo State Historic Site (FOLSHS) established a nominating committee and a formal nominating process to assist with the recruitment of new members to the board.
Three board members make up the committee. While the whole board is asked to think of potential candidates, it is the nominating committee that vets candidates and presents a list of nominees to the board.

Having a committee specifically focused on board recruitment takes pressure off of the executive committee and officers who are usually already working on many things for the Friends.

Some initial tasks a nominating committee could undertake include:

- Completing a board matrix to evaluate current board strengths and priorities for recruitment
- Developing job description(s)
- Developing prospect lists
- Developing a recruitment packet that includes information about the organization and expectations for board members

Convene a Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee

The online resource Blue Avocado suggests an interesting approach to recruiting new board members. In short, they suggest developing a list of people that you would like to have on the board but who would probably say no. Invite them to participate on a Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee.

This committee will meet only once—for one and a half hours—and then disband. At the meeting they'll get a nice lunch, a 15-minute update on the organization's critical issues, and they'll be asked to suggest a few people who could help on the most crucial, strategic work facing the organization right now. By the end of the meeting you should have many new names of people.

Outreach Efforts

When thinking about where and how to find potential new board members, start with your inner circle: current and past board members' networks; volunteers; and individual and corporate donors.

Once you've done that, move beyond the inner circle to: government officials; community foundations; community volunteers; and nonprofit networks. Research other organizations with similar missions—look at who is serving on their boards. These are typically people who are passionate about your cause as well. Perhaps some of these people are finishing their board term or maybe they can suggest others who are aligned with the Friends' mission.

One surefire way to find high-quality board members is to encourage every board member to use his or her network to constantly identify potential candidates. When board members attend events or community meetings, they can look around the room watching for individuals who might add value to the board. Having informal side conversations with these people about the organization will begin to lay a foundation for future board recruitment.

Specific kinds of people to consider reaching out to for board membership or for suggestions for candidates include:

- People who attend Friends/park/site events regularly
- A supportive local reporter
- Local history or community blogger
- Real estate agent (has the pulse on people moving into the area)
- Local business owners or CPAs
- History/science teachers or professors

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To cast a wider net, publicize the opportunity through the Friends' communications channels, websites like Craigslist, and community papers and pennysavers. Post flyers on local bulletin boards and at senior citizen centers, and have information when tabling at events.

Invite prospective board member to lunch, dinner, or coffee with the contact and the board chair. Then, invite them to a meeting of the Friends. The key is to follow up in a timely way.

Other outreach tips

- If the organization's bylaws allow for it, invite people to serve on a committee first before inviting them to serve on the board. For people with time constraints, this might be a more doable option. It also allows the board time to get to know the individual and make a decision as to whether or not to invite them to serve on the board.
- Invite people to serve on an advisory board. Again, this might be more amenable to someone with time constraints.
- FOLSHS stress the importance of prospective board members of knowing the monthly time commitment and having clear terms so that people can step off the board.
- The Friends of Taconic State Park have recruited people to champion particular projects. By dividing projects, you can help prevent board member burn-out and enable people to work on just the project they are interested in.
- The FOLSHS found moving to a one-year officer position term was a positive change for the organization. Board members were unable to commit to the previous term of two years. This simple change has encouraged board members to take on leadership positions.
- It sounds simple, but the Friends of Old Croton Aqueduct (FOCA) make a point to talk to people—not just at Friends events, but also out in the community. In their conversations, they try to find common interests and learn about a person's specific skills to find a match with the Friends' efforts.

Ongoing Support & Evaluation

Board members, especially those of all-volunteer organizations, work hard! So it's important to take time to get together in a non-work setting. For example, establish an annual board social gathering (e.g., wine and cheese, sporting event, barbecue or picnic, etc.) that is paid for by the Friends. Social gatherings can allow the board an opportunity to celebrate its accomplishments while also building camaraderie among board members.

FOCA stress the importance of making sure that everyone feels their role is essential to the organization. The chair assigns everyone a specific responsibility and tries to match the assignment with their specific skill set (e.g., acting as a liaison to a particular partner, writing the newsletter, leading a project, etc.). This way, board members can take pride in their work and not get bogged down with projects that they are less interested in or that do not match their skills.

It is also important for nonprofit boards to examine their own performance and find ways to make improvements. One way to do this is through a board self-evaluation process. A simple form could be completed by each board member that asks them to evaluate the performance of the board as a whole as well as their individual performance. The chair collects and analyzes the forms to look for common themes and areas that need further discussion,. This process should be conducted annually, for example, in advance of the annual meeting.

Sometimes it is in the best interest of the organization for a board member to step down and allow for the addition of new board members. The bylaws of the organization may already provide some guidance on this process: look to the section on removal of board members. Term limits are another way to give hard-working board members permission to take a break or provide a graceful exit strategy.

Further Reading

- Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee for Your Board (Blue Avocado)
- Board Recruitment webinar by BoardSource and LinkedIn
- Constructing a better board orientation (Laramie Board Learning Project)
- Board Member Self-Assessment (National Council of Nonprofits)
- What is an Advisory Board and Should We Have One? (Blue Avocado)

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