

1 MYTH

**It's the Cause, Not the
Company.**

THE TRUTH

Current board makeup is the number one reason a top-flight candidate will agree to consider board service—or will not.

Serving on a board is, after all, a voluntary activity. The experience has the opportunity to be satisfying and inspiring. At the very least it is a chance for members to work with a committed, intelligent team, one dedicated to making a difference. A board is not a country club; it is a band of dedicated brothers and sisters who have come together to make the world a better place. The key is that everyone at the table contributes and carries a share of the load.

What they say they want: connections to smart, accomplished, energetic people that they may already know or those they would like to know. Listen to the truth.

Board Story ---

I want a small group of board members I trust to get the job done.

“Much of the time I spend on board work is made worthwhile by the connections I make and what I pick up from fellow board members. We do well while doing good.”

As in life, there are those who are successful at every turn and others who, as my Dad used to say, are “late bloomers.” That’s what our leaders tell us. “The first thing I look at is who is listed on the left-hand side of the organization’s stationery. If I like the list, I may listen to you about board service. If not, you don’t have a prayer,” said one board member who serves on four boards currently, ranging from a start-up to a well-run international organization.

He agreed with a fellow leader, who said, “I have served on boards for 20 years. I go much deeper than just the names. I ask a lot of questions about the work of the board. Are they really involved, or are they simply allowing their names to be used? I was appointed by the government to one public university, and to my dismay, after joining I have found that only a handful comprehend the basics of board work. Rather than thinking deeply, they just fret about things like admission numbers or marketing expense, not about what is driving numbers up or down.”

This man shared with me the story of chairing an international arts nonprofit that was deeply in debt when he became chairman. In addition to the executive committee, he formed a management committee with two board members and the chair. “I wanted the ability to act when needed. The three of us focused on the mission and not ourselves. We disagreed, but we did it amicably.” On this board there were 60 people. Many

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were there because they loved the cause. Others were there because of the impact the organization could make. Others were there, he said, “to fill out their resume.”

In this case, the leader recruited a small band of brothers and sisters who drove fiscal policies, recruited a stronger board, launched and successfully completed a significant campaign, moved the organization into a beautiful and functional headquarters, and, most important, made a tremendous difference in the arts community. In seven years, he and his closest colleagues transformed an organization deeply in debt into one of the best-run arts organizations in the country.

“I wish I could just have nine people on a board who I know will think strategically, hammer it out, and at the end of the day just band together to get it done.” He knows who he wants on his left and right side next time.

Board Story —————

I want to start with a blank slate. Then let me run with it.

“I gravitate to start-up situations where I have been given the freedom to set it all up—the board and the staff. When I can bring together complex characters, formulate a mutually shared vision, and enlist a highly participatory board of people who are very active and highly respected, I know we can elevate the sights of people to join our cause. Frankly, when you bring in money, you can drive policy.”

This elegant and dynamic woman prefers smaller boards, at least in the organizational phase. In establishing a public television foundation board years ago, she was given carte blanche to design the organizational structure as well as choose and recruit the board and staff. On another board, she gathered

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a highly committed group of respected leaders who traveled the state selling the idea of a School for Math and Science Foundation, as well as raising the funding for the buildings and programs for this public boarding school for exceptionally talented students. The governing board for the school was politically appointed.

As chair, she invited the governing board to meet jointly and frequently to build relationships and to further school policies the foundation board believed to be important. When I asked if there was resistance from the governing board, she said, “Of course not. They met with us because they wanted to know us.”

As the foundation board brought in millions to fund the school, they were able to drive policy and bring the governing board to a new level. In this case, the self-selecting group provided what the politically appointed group wanted and needed: statewide awareness, credibility, and money. So while the politically appointed board did not have the stature that would attract her, the ability to shape the foundation board satisfied her and provided the lure to serve that is so very needed by board members. “As you look at board membership, if you don’t think the board is enlightened, don’t bother,” she said. She knows how to make the right list of potential board members, check it twice, and then bring them on board. Nice.

Board Story —————

I want names on the letterhead I respect. And give me time to get to know them.

“I am sometimes shocked at the difference in what a board looks like on paper and how it acts in reality.”

This talented board member, new to his retirement city and home, jumped in and saved a local cultural organization with

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hard work. He brought in staff and board talent and moved things along with his gifts as well. He expressed disappointment in another recent board he joined. “The names looked great on paper, and I had heard great things about these folks. I must admit I was less interested in the mission of the organization than the people on the board. However, it seems to be little more than window dressing. The culture is to sit quietly and not ask questions. I am not sure this is the board for me. With this culture, there is no way for me to make a difference or get to know my fellow board members.”

For this member, the board chair or executive director will need to recognize his bent for getting to an issue and helping solve it or he will fade away. At minimum, having social time before and after the meetings may help a member who wants to make new friends and will help the organization in return for meeting his need.

This board member goes on to say, “No board I am on is fully populated with an A-plus team. Many come only out of heart and don’t bring skills or networks or money that are needed. Some are witnesses just filling a spot. Others are bright, articulate, dedicated, and skilled and can really get things done. I like to be with the latter.”

Next time, I bet he will go well beyond “Who is on the board?” to “Who are they?” and “what are they doing?”

Board Story _____

I want to know a wide variety of smart, accomplished people.

“One of my favorite boards has 50 members . . . a university board composed of government appointees, faculty, staff, students, and alumni. I have come to know people I never would have known this well otherwise. When we make

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decisions, every constituency is at the table. This makeup has a huge potential for disaster, but we work together for the good of the university.”

This woman, like many with whom we work is passionate about her service. She has been chairman of almost every organization on whose board she has served. In her university, the board was composed of governmental appointees, presidential appointees, faculty, staff, students, and alumni. I immediately asked her if I had misunderstood.

I had not.

We agreed that this had a huge potential for disaster. However, in reality, it has had a great deal of success. Why? All of the constituent groups were represented. No one could sweep anything under the rug and make decisions for others! Imagine that!

This active woman speaks to two primary reasons this has worked: “The president of the university is beloved and trusted. He is fair and open at all times. And he makes sure that before and after every meeting there is scheduled informal time for all of us to get to know each other. There are many occasions where we are thrown together socially: retreats, university occasions, committee meetings, and much more. We have more respect for each other because we know each other. We know about each other’s children, illnesses, accolades, businesses, trips, and more. We are not a nameless group. We are real people with mutual respect, intellect, and trust. We work together for the greater good of the university, so it works.”

So, even a very large group can be highly attractive to this high value board member when she’s given the opportunity to know them.

Board Story ---

I want to use my brain.

“I am at the point that I want to be on a small board, no more than 12 people. I want my fellow board members to have best-in-class skill sets. We can scrub an issue and get something done.”

This young man chairs the board of a Fortune 500 company. That experience is the gold standard, as it is for many of the board members I interviewed for this book. “The for-profit company board ‘rings all the bells’ for me,” he says. “All of the board members are outside directors with world-class skill sets. I love that board because what we do is fun, we are engaged in stuff we should be, and we get things done.”

No nonprofit experience can come close to this for-profit for him. However, he has a love for the environment and is willing to work to save the planet. He can be on any board he wants. But what he wants is to serve on small organizations with big, meaningful goals. “People like me love chewing on an issue in an intellectual debate about what we do next. When expected to be a rubber stamp type, you have not dipped into my brain.”

Considering his experience, he refuses to be on any board that has no fiduciary responsibility. An automatic “no” comes with any request to serve on any advisory boards or boards of visitors because “all they want is my money. They want to spoon-feed me at a meeting and next week send a gift officer over to look at my paintings. I hate that. Use me intellectually or I tire of it quickly.”

June's Thoughts

Seasoned board members prefer a small group of people they can count on to do the serious work of the board. Unless starting a new initiative, leaders look for current board strength to warrant acceptance. While a great cause is important, it's not typically enough for someone to choose to serve on a board. The names are important, of course, but the good news is that this isn't totally self-serving. Having highly respected members on your board will give you a first pass for a positive discussion about an invitation to join the board.

To raise money and increase visibility you must look for board members with both the respect and profile to attract others, as well as the ability and willingness to use their connections. That is what you need. But what do they want? They want to be with people they know they can trust already or someone they want to get to know. Board members will serve your cause if you are serving theirs. Some want to choose the small group that will move the cause forward, while others find new friends they can highly respect and will be even more motivated to work for the cause.

What is the board member's reward? It is either a new network or, at the very least, a deeper one. Many times, fellow board members become close friends, and even more often, their relationships serve as a way for their business to flourish.

What do you get? Their reputation, connections, work, and projects accomplished for your cause. If the experience is good enough, and their passion for the mission deepens over time, you get their significant financial support as well.

Historically, these highly sought after individuals have come from a small band of brothers and sisters—a flock, a tribe. Today, there is more wealth and influence among people who do not belong to such a tribe of elites. These entrepreneurial leaders are busy and may well be unknown. Opportunities abound for

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nonprofit executives to find the next wave of board members as a way of connecting with a board member whose name is already on the list. The challenge is to bring the high potential but unseasoned board members into the fold of the board as quickly as possible—and be sure they are welcomed, challenged, and get what they want. So you can get what you want.

Among the articulate, successful, driven decision makers you pursue, consider not only the talents and interests of those you recruit, but also put some thought into who they know and who they might wish to know.

The first thing a prospective board member does is look at the names on the left side of the letterhead. Every time. Every interview. Everybody said this. First! These leaders say serving on a board is an honor and a deep responsibility. The seasoned people you want on your board will think first about who would be their partners at the board table. These folks like success. They believe it starts with the leaders and spreads throughout the winning team. Building a board is not unlike planning the most interesting dinner party.

Often, the first step to success is based on the question, “Who is coming to dinner?”

I have searched the literature thoroughly for data that talks about the meaning of the need for ultimate respect among fellow board members—a big part of what creates the board experience. There is nothing new on this topic as my board leaders describe it. All literature points toward a grid to have a broad range of people, looking at talents or geography or diversity. That’s all right with my group if—but only if—the qualification for board nomination is not diversity for diversity’s sake. Players with the capacity to lead, a willingness to make a real difference, and the network to help the organization move forward in some meaningful way all matter greatly. They just do.

