

## **A Primer for Building a Strategic Board**

By Sherri L. Oken

*Appeared in the "WednesdayReport" of [massnonprofit.org](http://massnonprofit.org)*

Nonprofits, regardless of size or sector, understand that a well-articulated strategy will help them achieve their mission, but may not always fully appreciate that creating a strategic board is critical to success. The following primer will provide guidance in creating a strategic board.

### **Strategic Board Characteristics**

It is a body that takes the long rather than the short view. It creates a vision for an organization and the means to fulfill that vision in concert with its mission and purpose. It insures that the necessary resources are available to implement the strategies essential to achieving organizational goals. It monitors progress and assesses success. It is focused on achievement and creating the conditions for success.

### **Developing a Strategic Board**

It starts by recruiting the right members. Envision the individuals and team you need based on what needs to be accomplished: a competency-based board with the essential skills and specialized knowledge needed to achieve your goals. Set aside old notions of qualifications (longevity in the field or as a member, friendship, industry knowledge, geography, etc.) to identify the right people.

Create a scalable matrix of needs and must-have skills by developing profiles for each board opening: strengths, skills, specialized knowledge, and personal attributes. Critically evaluate candidates based on needed competencies and if they will make the board a more effective whole:

- Do they have the temperament, experiential background and expertise to be both visionaries and good stewards of your organization?
- Will their motivation to serve promote or obstruct the organization's progress?
- Can they overcome potential conflicts of interest and act in the best interests of the organization?

Youth is not a disqualifier. You are seeking leaders, with varying perspectives, who have the ability to be effective on a nonprofit board; they are not being recruited to run a business in your industry or profession.

### **Attracting Competent Board Members**

Assure that their talent and especially their time will be well used. Make service attractive to the best candidates by sharing clear purpose and goals, defined responsibilities and expectations, and realistic assessments of the time commitment.

### **Conducting Business Strategically**

Strategic thinkers will not be attracted to a board that does committee work. They will be attracted to a board that is focused on creating the framework, setting the guidelines, ensuring the resources, and assessing the progress of the organization. If all someone wants to do is committee work, encourage them to join a committee or task force.

Prior to each board meeting, written reports on background information and progress that does not require discussion should be submitted and distributed as a package. Emphasize the basic board responsibility of reviewing all material in advance of meetings: the "duty of care."

Utilize action item, meeting agendas that lead discussions to decision making: formulate questions to be deliberated and answered.

Stay focused. The chairman must keep discussions on track, and when deliberation has been exhausted, introduce consent agenda items for a vote to avoid endless discussion of the same points.

### **Retaining Strategic Leaders**

Respect the time of your leadership. Meetings should be no longer or shorter than necessary to conduct the business at hand, and held at appropriately frequent intervals in line with your by-laws. Staff driven associations may require less frequent meetings. Conference call meetings are an effective way to move a time-sensitive, specific issue forward between regularly scheduled board meetings.

As with all volunteers, but especially with volunteers at the upper levels of leadership:

- Match them with appropriate responsibilities.
- Use them well and respect their time. Don't just "make work".
- Together, develop realistic expectations for success.
- Check in on their progress, and offer appropriate back-up and assistance.
- Provide meaningful recognition for their contributions.

*Sherri L. Oken, CAE, is principal of The Association Advantage LLC, an association management company that guides and supports volunteer leaders in managing their organizations and achieving their strategic goals. Contact her at 781-245-6485 or [solutions@TheAssociationAdvantage.net](mailto:solutions@TheAssociationAdvantage.net).*