



Management Assistance Group
Make real change

BOARD MEMBERSHIP

What kinds of people make good
board members?

What kinds of people are needed to make
up a good board of directors?

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I. INTRODUCTION

The two questions most often asked by those who have developed an introductory knowledge about boards of directors are: "What kinds of people make good board members?" and "What kinds of people are needed to make up a good board of directors?" The first question deals mainly with personal qualities and attributes of individual board members; the second relates principally to the array of skills, talents, experiences and other important characteristics that, when put together, build a good board of directors.¹

II. PERSONAL QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

It is not always easy to judge personal qualities and characteristics. But if a board is to be a working board -- and that is an underlying assumption of this paper -- certain qualities are enormously important and thus need to be lifted up and examined. Why? A working board is one that is fully engaged in and clearly responsible for the governance of the organization, it is not a "name" board or a showcase board that expects a smaller group -- usually the executive committee -- to do the board's work. Members of a working board must struggle together to form a body within which there are shared values, understanding, tolerance and mutual respect. A working board does not have the time to deal with those who come to the board without real commitment and who are unwilling to learn about and follow the dynamics of that board. Thus as difficult as the task of identifying desirable personal qualities might seem at first glance, it remains an important and worthwhile task.

The list of important qualities is not very long. In order of their importance -- more or less -- the qualities discussed below are: commitment -- or real openness to commitment -- to the organization's purpose; common sense and its companion asset, good judgment; respect for group processes, a capacity or even a desire to work with and within groups; centeredness -- personal self-awareness and acceptance; openness -- a keen desire to learn and to be on the growing edge; and, finally, a sense of humor. There are surely other important qualities, but if those who serve on boards had these attributes and characteristics, how enjoyable board work could be!

Let us discuss each quality briefly.

Commitment

The most important quality a nominating committee should seek in a board member is commitment -- or a very real openness to commitment -- to the organization's cause or purpose. While some may insist that board members need to be committed at the outset to the importance of the agency's role, that may be too limited a way of looking for good people. Indeed, it seems unreasonable to expect that all of the people that one would like to serve on a

¹ The Management Assistance Group has produced three papers about boards of directors of nonprofit organizations that precede this current effort. The first briefly describes the duties and responsibilities of a board of directors: (The Board of Directors of Nonprofit Organizations). The second explores the concept of following and leading boards: (The Board of Directors IS a Problem: Exploring the Concept of Following and Leading Boards.) The third paper provides a series of observations about boards of directors: (No Board of Directors Is Like Any Other: Some Maxims about Boards).

board will be committed to that organization's work before they know much about it. If this were so, the pool from which the nominating committee could select candidates would often prove to be too restricted.

Clearly, what is needed is openness to that commitment, and nominating committees will need to look for some demonstration of a potential for that commitment, some evidence that a candidate shares the values of the organization. What is it that these candidates do with their time, what other causes or purposes do they support? If an agency is dealing with social-change issues, other social-change organizations may offer prospective candidates. Do possible candidates have a history of committing time and energy to an agency; are they faithful and do they follow through?

Perhaps the principal caution is that it is not reasonable to expect that good, intelligent people are necessarily in what a particular organization is doing, no matter how wonderful it seems to those who already serve it. People's interests vary enormously and different things turn them on. It is a common error to expect that a good board member in one organization will make an equally good board member in another. If a nominating committee finds that a person has been principally associated with artistic endeavors or service oriented organizations, it could well be a mistake to ask that board member -- however good -- to serve on an action-oriented, public-interest and cause-oriented board without some other evidence of the candidate's interests. Commitment to cause is essential, otherwise the shared sense of values every board needs will not be there.

Common Sense and Good Judgment

Common sense, unlike the common man, is unfortunately a rather rare commodity. But it can be found and is sorely needed when board tempers flare, when the presentation of new ideas is upsetting, when strong positions are taken or pressure for decisions mounts. People with common sense somehow know that nothing is as good as it seems; they sense that amidst adamantly held and apparently opposite points of view there is common, sensible ground, and they are instinctively aware that the need for haste and immediate action is always exaggerated. Perhaps even more important than being certain that each prospective board member has common sense is a nominating committee's willingness to accept the fact that experts are not what boards need most. Yes, a board should have people on it who are knowledgeable about the substance of the agency's undertakings and understand the work in which the agency is involved. But all boards need other, less involved and less substantively informed people who will listen, ask questions, and apply common sense to the issues being raised.

Judgment relates to common sense, obviously, but it has more to do with how one proceeds as a board member. People with judgment understand how to raise issues and when to raise issues. They know when to support the staff or the staff leader, and when and how to confront leadership without raising staff defenses more than is necessary or useful. Good judgment may be as rare as common sense because it requires a sense of appropriateness. An important piece of information that nominating committees can seek is whether that person has been able to raise difficult issues in other situations in a way that has been helpful but firm. That sort of person is what a board needs, rather than someone who enjoys the heady role of the

adversary, one who is determined to win at my cost, or even one who is willing to be a "yes" man or woman.

Respect for Group Process

Another quality to be sought is found in those people who really like working in group situations -- in those who actively enjoy helping a group come to a good conclusion. Let's face it, we all have friends who are fine, bright people and yet have very little tolerance for any sort of group process. Often they ridicule group decision-making, feeling that it reaches the lowest common denominator, rather than "the best" decision.

Again, one way of considering whether people have this quality is to see what they do in their lives. Do they often involve themselves in group situations? Are they members of other working organizations and have they been members -- successful members -- of other boards? What do others think of them in terms of their capacity to work in group situations?

One person recently interviewed for a board was asked about her other board memberships -- and several of these were checked by the nominating committee -- and whether she "enjoyed" board work. After a several second hesitation she replied, "Enjoy may be too strong a word, but I feel a deep commitment to the work boards do and it is serious business with me." She seemed to be a very good risk and was asked to serve.

Centeredness

A fourth quality is centeredness. People who are centered and self-aware have come to some reasonable acceptance of who they are. They are not joining a board solely to prove something or simply as a way of gaining recognition. This is not to say that people should not join a board out of self-interest. Quite the contrary, while a good board member must be committed to the organization's interests, the best board members often have personal goals that they hope will be furthered in part because of their board service. At a minimum, most people who serve on a board do so in the belief that their own community standing will be improved.

What is difficult for a board to bear, however, is a person who is so self-important -- or perhaps so insecure -- that every question requires an answer, every remark requires a riposte, and all situations require the wisdom that only that board member can impart. Nominating committees will need to ask questions about how that board member is perceived by others. Does that person seek to be heard and acknowledged or is s/he able to listen to others, speaking only when a genuine contribution can be made? Centered people often have the courage to raise the hard questions, the "dumb" questions, and to risk. They will say things that others with less courage of self-acceptance might not be willing to say. These people often reassure weaker board members by their limited use of power and frequently provide much of the cement that binds a board together.

Openness

People who have this fifth quality are open to new ideas. They manifest in all that they do, in their career paths and their community endeavors, that they are not stuck, that they quest for what might work, what might help. They are not unreasonably angry at the changes in our

society, hoping only to go back to the "good old days." They do not hold on for dear life to what is -- or what they dream must have been --but demonstrate a keen interest in going forward in the face of upheaval and uncertainty. They are also wise enough to know that the future offers choices -- often difficult choices --and do not insist that one particular approach is the only path an organization can take.

I'm reminded vividly of a woman who has devoted forty years of effort to the issue of peace. After describing her work she queried, "We've lost every significant battle for forty years. The masses of armaments accumulate and the danger of nuclear holocaust increases. What are the ingredients of a successful strategy, those ingredients that we clearly have been missing? How do we broaden our work to include them?" After forty years she is ready to go again and seeks new ideas and possibilities that can serve as tools for peace.

People like this, people who are excited by the possibilities of life, are assets to a board. They can be life-giving, not only to the board but to the whole organization. Discussions with these people, or those who know them, will give evidence of this basic perspective, of their willingness to struggle on with optimism and good humor --which leads to the next quality.

Sense of Humor

This last quality may seem idiosyncratic or frivolous, but it is no less central than the other qualities discussed above. Having a sense of humor does not imply that a person must be humorous, but it does suggest that if board members do not have modest vestiges of humor, board work can become irritating, arduous, boring and unrewarding. Boards of directors do odd and perplexing things. In response one can become annoyed or one can adopt a more philosophical stance and a sense of humor helps. A tolerance for the strange and wonderful things people do in groups is enormously important, particularly for caring and committed board members. It is, after all, better to laugh than to cry.

A second value brought by those who have a sense of humor is the capacity to relax and not take themselves too seriously. Board members rarely "win" or carry their points, and will more than likely have to compromise or adjust to the emerging consensus. People who see the humor in a situation, those who can perceive the possible absurdities in their own positions, are generally more satisfied -- and satisfying --board members. They often make the most of their points or positions as well.

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Of course, you may say, you will never be able to find people like those described for your own board. Everyone else might be able to, but not you. Yet why should that be so? Is your organization not good enough to attract such people? Or have you simply not taken the task seriously enough, not devoted the time and energy to do the job, hoping that "good people" would somehow appear? If organizational leadership does take this job seriously, the quality of an organization's board can be improved significantly within a two or three year period.

III. SOME LESS DESIRABLE PERSONAL QUALITIES

Years of experience in the board-room, coupled with a persistent, puzzling sense of concern, have lead me to try to identify several kinds of people who prove to be unhelpful in the board-room or, worse, disruptive of the board's work and frustrating to board members. The five

types discussed below are people who might be called, Johnny One Notes, the over-the-wall artist.

Johnny One Notes

This is an old rubric derived from an Ethel Merman song about a person who is able to sing only one note. Unfortunately, that Johnny One Note is seen only too often in nonprofit board rooms, raising one particular concern meeting after meeting, sometimes relevantly, but most often irrelevantly. The issue or concern has become the focus of that person's life and it so dominates his/her existence that it must be drawn into every discussion at the slightest provocation -- or even without provocation.

The issue itself may indeed be legitimate and important -- special education, health-care for the elderly, affirmative action, environmental preservation -- but it has become an obsession and the board member seems incapable of letting go of the issue or seeing the importance of other issues. Board members don't know how to respond or how to incorporate that person's views and often end up feeling both irritated and guilty. It takes a skilled chair to acknowledge the individual board member and then to restart the discussion which has been interrupted.

Boards need people who will venture beyond single compelling concerns and join with fellow board members in determining what is best for the whole organization. Nominating committees need to avoid those who are so caught up with a particular issue that they are widely known to bore and depress others with their "one note."

The Over-boarded

Every community has a distinguished panel of well-known board-sitters and every board aspires to bring these people to its organization. Yet for all of their allure, they are usually so committed to other activities that they will do little for a working board, even if they should choose to join. Somehow we are so dazzled by these "board professionals" that we all miss the people who are not over-boarded but who are competent, potentially open to commitment and anxious to serve and to make their mark on their community. They are next year's movers and shakers, those on their way up who may soon be over-boarded themselves and they are worth seeking out. Most often they make better board members for the kinds of organizations we serve than those who are community stars.

The Devil's Advocate

"It is my job to raise issues that will not otherwise be considered by this board as it rushes to achieve consensus," so says the devil's advocate. Self-appointed, and a bit sanctimonious, this person enjoys pulling the board back, insisting that each issue be carefully dissected for hidden pitfalls and "what ifs."

Boards do need to ponder carefully what course they choose to take and that is hard work, involving question asking and reflection. But it is presumptuous -- not to say annoying -- for one person to assume that role for the board. It demeans the capacity and the credibility of other board members and retards the work of the whole board. Such people are easy to spot in conversations and often actually offer themselves to board nominating committees as devil's advocates. Beware!

Authority Figures

Boards are often disabled by having one amongst them who is regarded with such respect or awe that other board members are reluctant to speak their minds. Intentionally or unintentionally these people exude such authority that board meetings can become little more than monologues. Policies are not thoroughly and usefully thought out, but are pretty much preordained. A board either needs to aim to have a number of authority figures -- preferably of differing points of view --or to decide that it can do well enough without any. Those who are accustomed to leading find it hard not to run things and thus tend to dominate meetings. Older, "successful" white males are particularly prone to becoming authority figures and boards will need to know as much as possible about them before asking them to serve.

Off-the-Wall Artist

There must be a much more genteel term that describes this person but, after several months' thought, none has come to mind. Perhaps little needs to be said about these people who somehow seem to misunderstand the role of a board member. They are happiest when the discussions at board meetings stimulate them to propose a tangential -- or even farther out -- idea about what the organization might do. They tend to be stimulated rather frequently and their ideas usually don't fit in well, or at all, with where the organization is going. Nothing daunted, however, they bask in their own sense of creativity and frequently lead the board astray. A companion characteristic of these off-the-wall artists is a tendency to do nothing or virtually nothing between board meetings. The feeling of having been so immensely creative at the last board meeting often appears to have exhausted their capacities until the next meeting.

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These two lists are undoubtedly incomplete and experienced board members could surely add to them: for instance boards need to avoid the uncompromising who never go along, and to seek the risk-takers who are willing to try what hasn't been tried before, etc. But the central point is this: since most of us recognize the desirability and undesirability of the people described above as board members, it's well worth the effort to avoid those who are truly unsuited and uncomfortable with board work and to seek out those who understand, respect and enjoy working with others.

IV. PUTTING TOGETHER A GOOD BOARD OF DIRECTORS

"What kinds of people are needed to make up a good board of directors?" There are two stages to building an effective board of directors: the first involves the development of a profile or image of a board and the second outlines a process for bringing those people needed to the board.

Stage One: Developing a Board Profile

Organizations differ and boards of directors must differ accordingly. For this reason, each agency's board of directors should ask the nominating committee -- the most important committee of any board -- to develop a profile (a suggested form is attached) of what the

particular board should look like. This will require the committee to look closely at the organization's purpose and to reflect on the qualities, skills, experiences, interests, and relationships/ connections that members of the board need to bring to the board-room. These might include business experience or experience in nonprofit management, relationships with important community institutions, interest in public relations, skill in personnel development, leadership in related institutions or fields, etc. Obviously, no single member brings all of the attributes a board needs, but the composite board should bring them all. After the nominating committee has identified all of the characteristics needed by the board, the current membership should be analyzed to see to what degree the board already includes those qualities and to identify the major gaps. The committee will then need to single out three or four of the board's major needs and develop portraits of these people. This will help focus the committee's effort to prepare for the nominating process and its request to the board for names of likely candidates.

Let's stop here to make two points. First, the nominating committee should not ask board members to suggest candidates until the process described above has been completed. Too often nominating committees simply turn to the board and ask, "Do you know any good people who might serve on our board?" The results are predictable. Half of the board will not know anyone -- or at least think it does not know anyone -- and the other half will suggest names of friends, prominent board sitters and/or people they've heard about. All of this will be done without having the board's attention focused on what it needs most at this point in its life.

The second point is a more general plea for acknowledging the importance of diversity on a board of directors. Why is this so important? Because there is a tendency for directors of a particular board to look like each other and to act in very similar ways. Every board develops its own character and persona; it may be an older board or a younger one, mostly male or primarily female, principally white or mostly representative of a particular minority. Indeed, this is no accident. People tend to select others like themselves for boards on which they serve. There is comfort in the predictability of this sameness, comfort in knowing that a particular ethic or dynamic will be operating. It is much easier and less troublesome to operate with an understood dynamic that is reinforced by the kinship of those who serve on the board.

But while the comfort may permit ready agreement, it has its down side. The board probably does not hear, much less understand, the various perspectives that are important to the governance of that agency. All nonprofit agencies must, in the final analysis, operate effectively within our society if they are to succeed. Even when difficult issues -- education, minority concerns, the elderly, environment, peace, and health-care -- may well seem to indicate that boards should be comprised largely of people who represent those particular interests, the agency will inevitably miss important perspectives about the value of its concerns to the rest of society unless the board is more broadly representative of society. Indeed, tax-exempt nonprofits operate as public trusts and it is hard to imagine how they can carry out that trust when governed by boards that are monolithic and mono- chrome.

Creating diversity can be very difficult, particularly when it has been lacking for a period of years. It is uncomfortable to begin and it does not become easier quickly. It is inappropriate to bring on just one person to serve as a token on a board where everyone else looks and acts the same. Even though that token person can make a phenomenal difference in the way a board operates, women and minority people who have served in such positions can

tell you how uncomfortable it feels to be the only -- the token -- representative on a board. Indeed, having been elected as the first male member of a board of a woman's organization, I also learned quickly how dynamics can vary: having arrived for my election at a full membership meeting of 225 women -- and me -- without the brown bag lunch that everyone else had the good sense and experience to bring, I was not only uncomfortable, I was hungry.

Stage Two: Completing the Nominating Process

To continue with the nominating process, the nominating committee should request at least an hour of the board's time to describe to the board what gaps the committee has identified and the characteristics of the people the committee believes it should be seeking. It may be useful to frame brief job descriptions for the prospective new members perhaps suggesting for the first time that job descriptions might be useful for all board members.

The board should be asked to consider seriously and at length whether or not they know people who might be committed to the agency and its work, who have some of the qualifications needed, and who might be willing to serve. If a board can get sufficiently excited and motivated, it might even come up with the names of "twofers," people who offer two or more of the characteristics needed. Board members should also try to suggest references for each of the candidates they identify.

The nominating committee can then speak with candidates about their willingness to serve, check their references --perhaps with board help -- and then go forward with nominations of those they believe to be most qualified. In no case should the names of other candidates be lost; they should be put in a safe place as the beginnings of a board bank; a bank of names of people who might be qualified to serve in future years.

I've suggested that there should be only three or four nominees each year because of my belief that radical changes in boards can be harmful to a board's dynamic, to its way of working. Even though those in charge of nominations and those responsible for the viability of the agency may be in a hurry to improve the board, radical changes in board membership can be harmful to a board, keeping it from operating effectively for many months. It is best to proceed gradually and to recognize the reality that a good board will take two or three years of careful work before it has been built and is ready to move.

After the board election, the chair of the board should notify the nominees and ask to meet with them, even if briefly, to explain what the board is doing, where it is going, what the board seeks in bringing this person on as a new member and to find out what the board member would most like to do. The executive director or the president should prepare a board manual with by-laws, articles of incorporation, recent financial reports, recent minutes of meetings, a list of all board members with names and addresses, a list of the staff, a table of organization, if available, and program documents -- not too many -- which describe explicitly what it is that the organization is currently doing, and what its priorities and its emphases are. The executive director should also invite the new board member to the office to meet the staff and have any questions answered.

When the board meets, the orientation process should continue by asking some of the senior board members to describe why they attend board meetings, why they are members of that board and willing to give service to it when they could be at home or serving in a volunteer

capacity elsewhere. If senior board members can speak personally and from the heart about their participation it can be moving to other board members. It can also rekindle that board member's own commitment to the board. New board members will then feel included in the circle of board members which they will otherwise perceive as being a closed circle, one not really open to them.

While all board members need nurturing support if they are expected to carry out the work of the organization, new board members need that kind of support more than others. They need to be assured that their views are really welcome, that there are no secrets and no rituals that are closed to them, and that they have been brought on because of their qualities, skills, and abilities, which the organization believes to be vital to its success.

Surely there are other ideas about how one identifies and brings together good board members, but I hope these pages will give a reasonable outline of processes that will help build better boards for our nonprofit agencies.

BOARD PROFILE FOR: Destitute or Unemployed Management Consultants, Inc. (DUMCI)

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE To provide assistance and support to struggling management consultants to develop new skills and to locate new opportunities.	SEX		RACE					AGE			SKILLS/EXPERIENCE							AFFILIATIONS					INTERESTS				Yrs on Bd.	Term/Office/Exp/Committees								
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