



Published on National Council of Nonprofits (<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org>)

Original URL: <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/running-nonprofit/governance-leadership/finding-right-board-members-your-nonprofit>

Finding the Right Board Members for your Nonprofit

Entire books have been written about the art of cultivating, identifying, asking, and nurturing a strong nonprofit board. While we can't cover all the nuances here, we share curated resources and tips below to help shape your nonprofit's board into an effective force for good governance.

Find the “right” board member

Start with asking what does your nonprofit need to advance its mission right now and in the future? A board member with financial expertise? Connections in the community? Someone familiar with the individuals served by the nonprofit? More diversity in terms of age, gender, geography, race, or other attributes to help establish a broader base of understanding and experience?

Once you have identified the skills and experience your nonprofit needs, you're ready to identify and recruit new board members. The recruitment process requires both "vetting" a candidate and "cultivating" the interest of potential future board members until they are ready to accept an invitation to become an ambassador and advocate for the nonprofit.

Some nonprofits find that asking potential board candidates to first serve on a committee or task force, or volunteer for the nonprofit in another way, is a good way for both nonprofit and potential board members to find a good fit.

It is more than just a “nominating committee”

“Nominating committee” implies that the only function is to nominate board members for election to the board, but that limits our vision of good governance. It’s helpful to have a task force or committee of the board authorized not only to identify new board prospects but also to focus on the effectiveness of the board.

Serving on a charitable nonprofit's board is about more than just being elected – it requires continuous learning about those served and being an advocate for the mission, making decisions that are in the best interest of the organization, ensuring prudent use of the nonprofit's assets, and looking ahead to help the nonprofit plan for the future. All this requires “the vision thing,” which is bolstered by ongoing education about issues that affect the nonprofit's operations – both its external and internal environments.

As the name "governance committee" suggests, the focus of what used to be called the "nominating committee" can be expanded to encompass many aspects of effective board governance, and its role goes well beyond nominating. The committee tasked with keeping the board on track is usually also responsible for ensuring that the nonprofit has effective [governance practices](#), that individual board members are [engaged](#), and that the board as a whole is effectively [fulfilling its obligations](#) as a steward of the nonprofit's assets, reputation, financial and human resources, and mission.

The ask

While it should be every board member's job to be on the lookout for potential new board members, it's best if the actual invitation to join a board is extended only by those current board members who have been specifically authorized to do so. This usually happens *after* the committee charged with the task has reviewed a list of potential prospects, met with or spoken with several candidates, and decided not only who should be asked, but also determined who the best person to make the ask will be.

Need help finding the right board member? Contact your [state association of nonprofits](#), local United Way, or local community foundation, because they may know about board-match programs in your area.

Practice Pointers

- Start with an assessment of the skills, experience, and expertise of your existing board so you can identify gaps. Whether using a [full self-assessment of the board](#) or a short form “matrix,” beware of limiting your thinking.
- [Diversity on the board](#) is an important factor for sound and strategic decision-making.
- Consider using a board application form that individuals can fill out to indicate their interest in serving on the board.
- Once you’ve found a terrific board member who says, “Yes!” get them started on the right foot with an [orientation](#).
- Some questions that a board governance committee might ask to assess the ongoing health and effectiveness of the board include:
- How big is your board? Many governance gurus caution against boards larger than 13-17, because it’s so hard to keep all those board members engaged, and it can be unwieldy during meetings making sure that all voices are heard. (Also, it may be harder to reach a quorum with larger boards.) On the other side of the spectrum, very small boards are by definition limiting their perspectives and reach in the community. Nevertheless, each nonprofit needs to decide for itself what the right size is. [What’s the right size for your board?](#) (Blue Avocado)
- Have you considered that bringing on a new board member who may be adding to the full board's diversity profile could go more smoothly if the new board member was part of a cohort of more diverse members? or had a "board buddy" as a mentor?

Additional Resources

- [Strategic Board Recruitment Toolkit](#) (available for purchase from the Maine Association of Nonprofits)
- [Board recruitment resources](#) (BoardSource)
- Benchmarks for boards: [Leading With Intent](#) (BoardSource)

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