

Building a Gold Star Board

Contributor: Katherine Whitney

The most effective nonprofits typically have strong and engaged boards. Many board governance committees, however, devote too little time too late in the year to cultivating their next class of board members. According to Katherine Whitney, a director of Warren Whitney and a BoardSource Certified Governance Trainer, building and maintaining a strong board requires a year-round effort. The following are some important considerations.

1. **Ensure that your board structure is appropriate for your organization.** These considerations include board size, terms and term limits, committee structure and charters, and content discussed at board meetings. The best board members will not stay engaged if they are frustrated by structure and process.
2. **Identify the skills and attributes needed on the board.** “Almost every board needs some board members who bring skills in finance and accounting, fundraising, and legal issues,” says Katherine. “Beyond that, the organization’s current position and strategic direction help inform the desired profile of the board as a whole.” Consider areas such as:
 - **Marketing and Communications:** Strategic board-level thinking in this area can help strengthen program success as well as donor cultivation.
 - **Board Diversity:** It’s important to consider what types of diversity can make the board stronger. Many people think first of cultural and gender diversity, but boards should also consider attributes such as age, geography, and employer affiliation.
 - **Leadership Potential:** Some board members should have the potential to become future leaders of the board.

Once the desired board profile is in place, a board matrix is a tool that can help identify the skills and attributes currently represented on the board and those that need to be added.

3. **Create a list of people that you would like to have on your organization’s board.** “This may be a running list that you have built over a couple of years,” says Katherine.
 - **Recruit a mix of members for the board**—“People like working with friends, but they also look forward to meeting new people with whom they might not otherwise have an opportunity to work,” says Katherine. The “connecting circles” approach gives the organization greater reach in the long run.
 - **Aim high.** Shoot for the strongest potential board members you can think of, and then be prepared to wait for them because they’re probably already busy. Waiting several years for the right person will pay off in the long run.
4. **Cultivate potential board members.** Many boards think they can work on board cultivation a few months out of the year, but this should be an ongoing cycle.
 - **Begin by introducing potential new board members to the organization** and helping them understand its mission.
 - **Ensure that potential members fully understand all the expectations of board service before they join the board**, including the expectations of financial support.
5. **Orient and engage new board members.** Help them learn about the organization and get them involved in a committee as soon as they join the board so that they are engaged and responsible for taking action. Finally, remember that stewardship is just as important for board members as it is for donors.