



FORMING THE FIRST BOARD

The first challenge for a founder of a new nonprofit organization is to build a board. This means recruiting committed and resourceful board members, organizing the first board meeting, and most importantly, guiding the new board immediately on its future role and responsibilities. The full board must get involved in fine-tuning the mission and setting the guidelines for effective governance.

Immediate demands on the first board

After the initial decision to create a nonprofit, the founder must form a board. Sharing the workload with the board reduces the founder's burden and gets everyone oriented as a group. Board members need to participate in developing strategic issues with the founder, thus allowing them to build the future together and establish ownership for the plans.

The start-up phase serves as the initiation for the board. If there is no staff yet, the board must serve also in that capacity. Everybody is a volunteer and must be willing and able to commit the necessary time in setting up the organization. For instance, if the nonprofit exists only in theory, the board immediately needs to file tax-exemption application and possibly incorporate the organization. At the first board meeting, assign additional tasks for everyone. Often the board continues to be a working board for some time. As soon as the organization is settled and financially stable enough to hire staff, can the board devote its efforts on its primary task — serving as the governing and oversight body.

What should the first board look like?

The first board is the foundation for the organization. Find the skills and expertise that you need to get started. Find people who are familiar with your constituents and their needs. If you are dependent on outside funding, engage someone who can assist in developing a fundraising plan. Find someone who understands the field or mission area that you are involved in. Bring in innovative people who have new ideas. You need someone who understands technology. Make sure they can work as a team. Accept only leaders to secure the board's future leadership.

Start with a small but committed group. If you have a working board, decide what the ideal size is to get the initial

work done. If you can hire staff, define your own role either as a board member or part of the management team.

Where to find board members

Board recruitment can be difficult. Where can you find individuals who are interested in the mission of the organization, who have the time to get involved, bring in needed skills and expertise, and also provide leadership for the organization? The following sources may provide references or actual candidates:

- Circle of friends and neighbors,
- Professional and business contacts,
- Other organizations and their annual reports,
- Professional associations,
- Major corporations and their community outreach programs,
- Local business people,
- Local United Way chapters or community foundations, and
- People who are featured in the news or printed media.

The first board meeting

For some boards the first board meeting is the first official opportunity to meet fellow board members. For other boards there may already have been plenty of communication but this meeting starts the formal activity of the board as a legal entity. During the first meeting, besides getting to know each other, the board must

- fix the name and the legal address for the organization to be included in its legal documents
- elect officers
- authorize new officers to make business decisions for the organization (open bank accounts, sign checks, sign a lease)
- adopt a set of bylaws (if they already have been drafted) or start creating this document
- assign duties for everyone

The next step

A group is as efficient in accomplishing its mission as its guidelines are explicit. Create a governance committee that is constantly involved in renewing the board and educating it. This committee may need to do some research and educate itself sufficiently before it can guide the rest of the team. Make sure that each board member understands

his or her responsibilities. Implement term limits to bring in additional new ideas to your board on a regular basis. Organize orientation for new board members. Create other committees or task forces to engage your board members individually. Finally, stress that boards act only as a collective entity — decision making is a group function.

References

The Board Building Cycle: Nine Steps to Finding, Recruiting, and Engaging Nonprofit Board Members

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