Governance
Best Practices: Engaging Nonprofit Board Members

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Background

Choosing the right people is crucial to the success of a nonprofit board of directors. Boards can maximize their chances of finding the right fit by adopting some best practices for nominating board candidates and training new board members. These practices begin with identifying possible candidates and follow through the cycle of engaging and getting to know potential members. Drawing from on-line research and interviews with Upper Valley nonprofit representatives, this document compiles common policies and procedures around finding and educating new board members for the region’s organizations.

Topic 1: Suggestions from interviews on nomination process

Before you start:

- Given the needs of the board and bylaws, what is your target number of board members?
- If the board needs a new member, articulate the key skills gap you want to fill. Allow board members to update their current and “want to develop” skills.
- Build in term roll-offs into calendar, ie three months before a board member’s scheduled term ends should be highlighted to the governance committee. Some organizations start the search process up to five months in advance to a term roll-off.
- Create and maintain “Board Member Job Description” that articulate what skills, experiences, etc the board is seeking.

Build your bench—maintain watch list

- As part of committee assessment, ask sitting board members to identify potential candidates and take ownership for starting the nominating process if appropriate.
- Blue-Ribbon committee: invite key people from the community for brainstorming session (1-2 hr) for candidates.
  - Maybe bring in some of the key individuals from the capital campaign for this session.
  - Provides one-time low commitment/high impact engagement.

Referral form

- Include space for references and contacts for prior board (if appropriate). As part of formal interview evaluation, reach out to references.
- Ensure that board members adhere to protocol (ie form must be filled out for candidate to be considered).

Engagement of candidate

- Nominator has informal contact with potential candidate. Either Nominator or potential candidate fills out referral form.
- If mutual interest, set-up informal contact with governance committee member. This meeting is meant to be a “get to you know you” interaction.
- If mutual interest, governance committee provides board package of information to candidate and candidate information sent to the board. Candidate given time to process board package and reach out to other board members. Note: most boards provide this information at the formal interview, but I see value in allowing the candidate to digest and prepare for formal interview using these materials.
- Governance committee chair and if possible, one other board member/staff conduct formal interview. Candidate invited to board meeting, with time for Q&A between candidate and board members. During executive session following this board meeting, board votes on the candidate. **Note:** If a candidate makes it to the board meeting, it would be potentially damaging for the board to reject the nomination. Consider how the board wants to handle this possibility and prepare accordingly.
- If qualified candidate is unable to serve at current time, consider low-time com-
mitment engagement opportunities to maintain link with the individual. Given the number of nonprofit board service opportunities, individuals may rotate through boards and may be available for the next board position.

**Topic 2: New board member training**

[From NH Center for Nonprofits]

**Board orientation checklist**

- Tour facility
- Introduce to staff and specifically to administrative assistant assigned to the board communications
- Provide board manual and/or information on how to access board portal and demonstration of website use
- Provide profiles of fellow board members
- Provide list of committees
- Provide meeting schedule
- Provide copies of mission and vision
- Provide brief historical overview and key milestones of nonprofit
- Discuss mission and provide stories, data and overview of what is being accomplished
- If appropriate, invite clients or constituents to describe benefits of services and share outcomes
- Review fiscal report and describe how financials are provided to board and key fiscal indicators the board tracks
- Provide copy of most recent Form 990 and audit
- Review Strategic Plan and discuss and how plan is used and the process for future planning
- Review Business Plan/Budget and progress against plan
- Review committee structures and task force sub-groups and discuss process for serving on a committee
- Ask senior management team to meet with new member and describe priorities and roles
- Discuss the ways in which board members engage in fundraising strategies and the giving expectations for board members
- Connect new board member to a senior board mentor – so that throughout the first year the new member has someone to help with engagement

**On-line resources:**

- [www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NAMI_Center_for_Excellence/Tools_for_Excellence/BoardMemberOrientationOutline.pdf](http://www.nami.org/Content/NavigationMenu/NAMI_Center_for_Excellence/Tools_for_Excellence/BoardMemberOrientationOutline.pdf)

**Interview participants**

I would like to thank the following individuals who took time out of their days to speak candidly with me on the above governance topics.

- **Ellen Koening**, NH Center for NonProfits, Director of Education and Resources
- **Rick Cote**, Haven, Board President
- **Conrad Reining**, Upper Valley Trail Alliance, Board President
- **Russel Hirschler**, Upper Valley Trail Alliance, Executive Director
- **Becky Rice**, Upper Valley Trail Alliance, Governance Chair
- **Janet Miller Haines**, Northern Stage, President
- **Suellen Griffin**, West Central Behavioral Health, Governance Chair
- **Gene Garthwaite**, St. Thomas, Senior Warden
- **Allison Colburn**, Child Care Center of Norwich, Executive Director
- **Bill Geraghty**, Vital Communities, Nominations Chair
- **Mary Margaret Sloan**, Vital Communities, Executive Director