



# BOARD BUILDING

## IDENTIFY

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Board profiling is a valuable exercise for clubs to incorporate into their nominating process. It forces the board to assess what characteristics and skills their current board brings to the club and what gaps exist on the board that need to be filled when recruiting new members. Consider both the attributes and skills of prospective board members. Remember, a club will look for different skills and strengths from its board members depending upon its stage of development and other circumstances.

In considering board building, a club is legally obligated to follow its bylaws, which include specific criteria on board structure and composition. All decisions made and actions taken by the board should be considered against the framework of the current bylaws (Or, the bylaws may need to be updated to acknowledge changes in the environment and community).

### What Do We Need and Who Do We Want?

In beginning the search process, the board needs to ask the following questions:

1. What is the current composition of your board?
2. What characteristics, skills, experience, and backgrounds does your board need now?
3. What gaps does your board need to fill in the future?
4. What are the priorities for identifying and recruiting new members?
5. What other attributes or qualities are important for your board members to have?

Adapted from "Board Profiling Worksheet" from Six Keys to Recruiting, Orienting, and Involving Nonprofit Board Members by Judith Grummon Nelson (NCNB, 1995).

### **BENEFITING FROM DIVERSITY**

By understanding the power of diversity and by utilizing it appropriately, a nonprofit board possesses the basic tools for creating a responsive and open-minded club.

#### Defining board diversity

Board members have a surprisingly demanding and varied job to do. Rarely can one board member fulfill most of the necessary functions. If that was the case, few boards would need more than two or three members. By focusing on defining board diversity in terms of skills and aptitude, we can create a structure for matching club needs with acceptable candidates. Various backgrounds and experiences (professional and personal, as well as cultural and ethical) add to the quality of the board.

Other important characteristics could include leadership skills, community involvement, public recognition, political connections, fund-raising capacities, and shared values and commitment. Familiarity with the Club's Movement and community can be important. Sometimes the presence of a few donors, professional insiders, customers and clients on board can positively benefit the Club. These examples all focus on maximizing the special value of each board member in the Club.

#### Why is a diverse board a benefit?

- A homogeneous board may not always be ready to deal effectively with problems due to an inherent near-sightedness. Diversity on a board breeds varying opinions, approaches, attitudes, and solutions. It requires open-mindedness, curiosity, acceptance, and responsiveness, which can ultimately facilitate understanding and willingness to work together. This is clearly not the easiest way to force a group to make decisions but different or opposing backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, habits and norms can force a consensus-oriented approach to conflict management.

- Boards are often expected to represent the club's constituency. This is a way to create accountability and form a link with the constituents. A uniform board may not make the necessary effort to create this sense of community leadership.
- Diversity for the sake of diversity, even without pointed constituent representation, can form a base for innovation and creative thinking.
- A diverse board sends a message and sets a powerful example for the entire club.

#### How to avoid tokenism?

Start with a firm commitment to diversity. Announce it; put it in writing. Creating a sense of ownership is difficult if recruitment of new board members is based on pure representation of a specific group in the constituency. No board member wants to fill a quota. No one should be required to—in fact, no one is able to—represent an entire subsection of the population. Board members contribute according to their skills and knowledge. Focus on the entity as a diverse mixture, not on individual representation.

To avoid the appearance of creating token positions, it is necessary to treat each board member equally. Expect the same from everyone; each board member, new or old, has the same responsibilities. Involve every new member immediately. Assign tasks independently of cultural or ethnic background. Recruit several members at the same time from the same group.

#### How to deal with dissent?

Disagreement is a natural by-product of diversity. By cultivating acceptance toward differing opinions, it is possible to expand the base from which to make educated decisions. Seeking agreement on the broadest issues first creates a strong foundation for debate. The role of the board chair as a mediator cannot be over-estimated. At the end, however, it is important that each board member respects the democratic process and is able to represent the official position to the outside world.

#### Recruitment process

It is difficult to create an effective recruitment strategy without first assessing the present composition of the board first. Establishing the profile of the existing board helps identify the missing links. The board development committee has a key role here. It should have a continuous pool of candidates at differing stages of cultivation so that when an opening needs to be filled or when it is time to expand the board size, the process is ready to deliver. Diversity among the board development committee members, naturally, is the key element for increasing the heterogeneity of the board.

Taken from the "Club Leadership Development Notebook" a publication from *BoardSource* created specifically for USA Swimming. For more information about *BoardSource* write to 1828 L Street NW, Suite 900, Washington, DC 20036-5114. Telephone (202) 452-6262. Fax: (202) 452-6299, email: [mail@mail@boardsource.org](mailto:mail@mail@boardsource.org), website: <http://www.boardsource.org/>. Copyright 2000. Used with permission.