

**“Although this does not reflect current practice by the CCA it is some food for thought to possibly generate more nominees for the board of governors”
2011 Governance Committee**

The Board Member Shortage - As a recruitment crisis mounts, nonprofits look to the next generation of board members

By: John DiConsiglio

Lisa Cain has looked in the Washington Post classified ads for everything from jobs to cars to apartments. So why not a seat on a nonprofit board?

That's how Cain found her way to the board of Calvary Women's Services, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that provides housing and support services to homeless women. Cain, who is now the board president, is one of a handful of Calvary's 16 board members who were recruited through the classifieds. Some of the candidates who answered the ads have been terrific additions to the organization, she says. And some haven't worked out.

"OK, it's not exactly strategic planning," Cain concedes, noting that the board has since initiated more focused recruitment efforts. "But when you're searching for good board members, you'll look anywhere."

Newspaper ads. Professional contacts. That person you see each morning at Starbucks. Boards are scouring their personal and professional landscapes in search of new members. Perhaps no current issue vexes board members quite like recruitment. More and more, boards say they can't fill vacancies in an effective and speedy manner - not to mention find top board members who can bring needed skills and diversity to their organization.

According to a May 2002 Booz Allen Hamilton survey, boards are facing a dire recruitment scenario. Nearly 1.8 million board seats become available every year, adding to a backlog of 1.2 million standing openings, the survey notes. Minorities are particularly under-represented on boards, accounting for only 14 percent of board members as compared with 27 percent of the population.

"There's no doubt that it's getting harder to find that top board member - by which I mean a person who brings the kind of resources you need to implement your mission," says Berit Lakey, BoardSource senior consultant. "Some people are concerned about the responsibility and liability that goes with being a board member. Some people simply lack the volunteer time. And, in some cases, particularly within small communities, there is a real competition for the people who have the skills and willingness to serve."

But even with so many factors weighing against them, experts say that boards can take advantage of a substantial pool of candidates - if they just know where to look.

"The good people are out there. They are willing and eager to serve on boards. They are just waiting to be asked," says Brooke Mahoney, executive director of the Volunteer Consulting Group, the founders of BoardNet USA, an online board member-matching service.

"I wouldn't say there is an absolute shortage of people willing to serve on boards. That doesn't mean it's easy to find them. What it really comes down to is hard work and time," says Mike Allison, director of consulting for CompassPoint Nonprofit Services. "It may take months. It may take years. But you can find good board members. What you can't do is expect a great board member to just show up on your doorstep."

New Blood, New Ideas

Too many boards aren't prepared to even begin a search process, Lakey notes. After relying on word-of-mouth as their sole recruitment tool, many boards haven't accepted recruitment as part of an ongoing board development plan. Many haven't fully assessed their board needs, profiling their board composition to find the specific skills and qualities they are lacking. Others are unprepared to change to better reflect their constituency.

"You sit at your board table and everyone around you looks like you," Lakey says. "And everyone they know looks like you too. It's awfully hard to get new ideas, new perspectives, and new skills that way."

That's the exact problem that Calvary Women's Services faced. In addition to running newspaper ads, Calvary's greatest recruitment efforts came from word-of-mouth spread by fellow board members. But the board was dominated by 30-something white women, says Kris Thompson, Calvary's executive director. "We needed to get our board to look outside their intimate circle to bring in new blood and new diversity," Thompson says. "Our members would recommend their good friends. I'd have to gently tell them that this person matches their same skill sets, their same background, and their same contacts. Maybe she'd make a great board member. But she wasn't what we needed right now."

As Calvary has grown - the group is about to open its third shelter, ballooning its budget by a quarter of a million dollars to \$800,000 - the organization has shifted its focus to its own version of "nontraditional" board members: older people who have greater board experience and are professionally and financially well-established. "We're not looking for a whole board of old, rich, white men," Thompson says. "But we have to recognize that a lot of the people on our board haven't had experience in fundraising. Their personal giving is limited - and their access to people with funds is limited."

But identifying the right board members - those with both skills and resources as well as dedication and a passion for the mission - can be just as difficult when searching among experienced professionals. "The first person a nonprofit targets is the big CEO whose name they read in the newspaper," says Alice Korngold, president and CEO of Business Volunteers Unlimited, a Cleveland-based board development group that matches business executives with nonprofit boards. "You probably don't know anything about that person's expertise or background. They may not be the type of board member you really want."

In fact, many high-level CEOs are among the most disappointing board members, says Mary Tidings, managing director of Russell Reynolds Associates Inc., a search firm for corporate boards and CEOs. "Often you are looking for a big-name CEO who can open doors and write a big check," she says. "Even if you get them on your board, they may not do that for you. You'll often find far greater commitment and energy from that next level of business executive."

Thinking Ahead

Often, the right board member match can still be found through focused recruiting by a board's governance committee. Expanding the role of a nominating committee, a governance committee embraces board orientation and continued training. It also identifies and cultivates quality candidates. "Think beyond Mr. Got Rocks and Madame Butterfly," says Carol Stone, president and CEO of the Volunteer Center of Orange County. "You know more people than you think. The person who runs the grocery store or the cleaners down the street. The secretary in your office building. These are people who have the time, the willingness, and probably more access and influence than you expect."

Others turn to search firms. But while large firms can cull from a vast pool of candidates, their fees can be prohibitive. Russell Reynolds's Tidings concedes that few nonprofits can afford their standard \$75,000 search price tag, or even a more modest \$30,000 fee. Smaller "boutique" firms charge fees of \$5,000 to \$10,000, "but they don't have nearly our resources," Tidings says.

Free services - like BoardNet USA or Business Volunteers Unlimited - have been successful for some nonprofits. Of its 1,500 online applicants, BoardNet says it knows of 43 candidates who joined boards and 23 boards that claim to have found members since the site launched early last year. Business Volunteers has placed 776 business executives on 241 boards in the last nine years, Korngold says. "It's very hard for a board to find the right candidates without vehicles like these," she says.

But third-party services don't replace the hard work and strategic planning each board needs, says CompassPoint's Allison. "It's not like ordering up a pizza," he says. "A lot of recruitment has to do with chemistry and nuance and cultivating long-term relationships."

Indeed, forming ties with potential board members can be time-consuming. Looking to add more diversity to its board, Calvary has asked one of its African-American board members with ties to Ivy League alumni groups to help the organization make inroads to black business associations and student organizations. "We are paving the groundwork for the future," Cain says. "It hasn't paid off yet. But we're looking down the road. We are in this for the long haul."

Step-by-Step: Recruiting Board Members

An organized recruitment process is vital to the ongoing health of a board. It helps fill vacancies and build a skillful and diverse board. If your board hasn't planned ahead, consider these recruitment steps as compiled by BoardSource consultants.

Make a board profile - Define your goals. Analyze your present board composition and look for areas where you need help. Do you need more people who are well connected with your constituents? Is your board diverse? Do you need extra fundraising capacity?

Form a governance committee - The search for board members should be ongoing. A governance committee focuses on this process on a regular basis. Its task is to find the best candidates, convince them of the benefits of board service, present the candidates to the full board, and, after the final nomination, make sure the new board members are well equipped to do the best possible job.

Have a search strategy - Governance committee members must constantly observe their environment and community to locate suitable candidates. They need to enhance the profile of the organization and make its mission known. They need to portray the board member's role objectively and accurately as well as lay out the challenges in positive terms.

Don't exclude your chief executive - The chief executive has the most intimate knowledge of the organization. She can assess the board's needs, identify valuable prospects, and help inform and integrate new board members into their new roles.

Cultivate a relationship - Finding new board members can be time-consuming. Decide first who is going to make the initial contact. The chair should follow up with a letter and appropriate material describing the organization. You can invite candidates to your special events like concerts or exhibits, a tour of the services, lunch with veteran board members, or even a board meeting.

Value orientation - All newly elected board members need a thorough orientation, no matter how extensive their previous board experience. Every board has its special characteristics, personal dynamics, requirements for involvement, and a structure that needs clarification. The governance committee should organize regular orientation for new board members.

References

Sandra R. Hughes, Berit M. Lakey, and Marla J. Bobowick, [*The Board Building Cycle: Nine Steps to Finding, Recruiting, and Engaging Nonprofit Board Members*](#) (BoardSource 2000). Volunteer Board Consulting, Inc., www.boardnetusa.org