

SUPER BOARDS

*How Inspired Governance
Transforms Your Organization*



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Introduction

INSPIRED LEADERSHIP AND THE SPIRIT OF COLLABORATION

“My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.”
—From *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare

Nonprofit organizations have always faced both unique challenges and amazing opportunities as they seek to live out their mission and vision. These challenges and opportunities continue and arguably are more acute than before. The reasons are many—the economic reality has certainly placed stress on many nonprofit organizations. All the while, the incredible people who work and lead these organizations do so with passion, commitment, and a renewed dedication to their profession. Where in this panorama of challenges and opportunities do we find the board of trustees? That is the central question for us to discover in this

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book. It is their leadership and spirit of collaboration that we are seeking.

In the world of nonprofit books and other publications I am well aware that the actual and virtual bookshelves are crowded with literature addressing the topic of nonprofit governance and board development. The question then becomes, does my work add anything new or look at this topic in a different way that contributes to the dialogue? It is a valid question. I recently read an impressive new biography about Thomas Jefferson. There are numerous books written about Jefferson. Did we need yet another biography? After reading this latest biography I would conclude that we absolutely did! Why? Because the author takes a fresh look and perspective of the great man and shines a light on his genius that otherwise might not have been explored.

In this book I have tried to achieve something different—to focus attention on several issues that serve to reveal and separate organizations that have strong, dynamic boards that include leaders whose genuine purpose is to be the best possible board member. My five specific goals include:

1. To describe and discuss the transformational responsibilities of the committee on trustees in such a way as to elevate their mission to recruit, retain, educate, and evaluate the board.
2. To introduce a component to the discussion of board responsibilities that solidifies the all-important relationship that board members must have with one another and with the organization's leadership. This Covenant Agreement is a document some

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organizations possess but do not give the attention needed for excellence.

3. To think differently and more openly about governance and to create a culture that understands that serving on the board is serious work, but that we find a place for joy in the excellence that is the capstone of the experience.
4. To assure leaders that the status quo is not a “death sentence.” An organization’s, and specifically a board’s, ability to function at the highest level can move from bad to good and good to great. It is possible and worth the effort (perhaps the sacrifices) required to move forward.
5. To reinforce the central theme that although the board of trustees of an organization consists of many individuals, it must, once a decision is made, act and speak with one voice.

As referenced above with the quotation from Shakespeare, this book is to be thoughtful and intentional in its approach to the topic of how nonprofit governing boards can genuinely strive to be excellent in carrying out their tasks and responsibilities. Words alone are not enough—but the right words, coupled with right actions, will make a positive difference and have the greatest influence.

Leadership is defined in different ways by different people with different perspectives. Here is the way I define it: *Leadership is the ability of someone or a group to encourage and to inspire*

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others. It is the ability to discover the best in someone and, through encouragement and inspiration, to bring out the best in individuals or groups. It is also the recognition that relationships matter, particularly the relationship between the CEO and the board of trustees. It is through this lens that we shine a spotlight on creating and sustaining super boards.

As in my book *The Board Game*, the ultimate achievement is raising the issues and engaging in meaningful discussion. That is where the magic may be found. My hope is that you will discover something new, different, meaningful, or helpful as you read, reflect, and act on the pages that follow.

VOLUNTEER BOARDS— VOLUNTEER LEADERS

Volunteer boards are an essential part of every nonprofit organization. They are required by state and federal law and therefore play a central role in the organization's ability to achieve its mission and vision. When boards are utilized effectively, they can be a major asset and a source for support not found elsewhere. However, if proper leadership and direction are absent, volunteer boards can be a roadblock and actually prevent an organization from achieving its goals. At the beginning of the process of examining the governing board, here are some of the issues that should be priorities:

- Focus on board responsibilities and begin to make a list of what constitutes a dynamic and inspired board. How does the organization's mission and vision impact board responsibilities and priorities?

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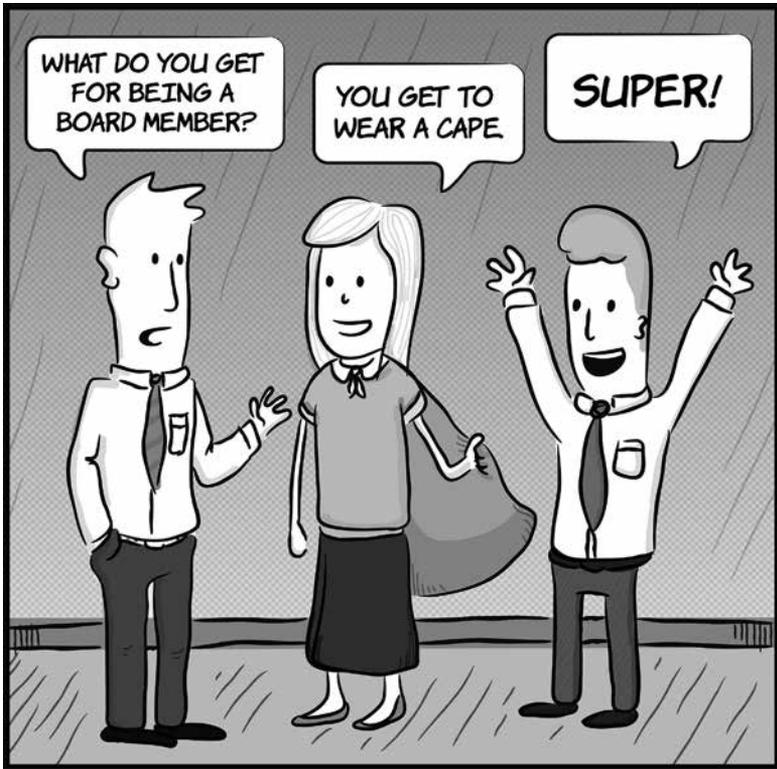
- Analyze the current board in terms of their effectiveness and develop criteria such as: fundraising, professional skills, diversity, advocacy, attendance, participation, etc. Discover what is working well that should be supported and what is not working that should be improved or eliminated.
- Decide what mix of talents make the board most effective. What are the needs that can be addressed by talent and skills represented on the board? Do we really understand the needs and do we have the capability of attracting these kinds of individuals?
- Consider statements such as *The Covenant Agreement* or adopt *The Governance Promise*, something that provides clear understanding as to the importance of the relationship between the staff and the board. These guiding principles can set expectations and be a road map for current and future board members.
- Develop a manual that includes such information as:
 1. List of current board members, including contact information
 2. Mission statement
 3. Brief history of the organization
 4. Marketing and fundraising materials
 5. Meeting calendar for the year
 6. Minutes from the previous year

7. Other relevant material that would assist a new board member

BOARD OF TRUSTEES VS. BOARD OF TRUST: ONE BOARD—ONE VOICE

Perhaps it is only a matter of semantics, but I believe it is worth making note of the distinction between a term we use widely and probably give little thought to the inferences and a term that is used much more sparingly. The board of trustees suggests a group of individuals who act and perform their roles and responsibilities as a group. The Board of *Trust* suggests that this is a group who act and perform their responsibilities as one cohesive unit. I believe that this is not simply semantics but rather a statement about the true meaning of *trusteeship*. Working together with one voice is, or certainly should be, the way in which the best and most effective boards function. Throughout this book I refer to the board of trustees, but my hope is that these individuals have come together for the greater good and truly function as a Board of Trust.

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RECRUITING INSPIRED BOARD MEMBERS

Recruiting and maintaining the most inspired board members possible is the joint responsibility of the board's committee on trustees (the most-often used name for this committee), all board members, and the organization's staff. Each of these two components has an important task when considering who to add to the board. The needs of the organization must be clear and carefully articulated to a prospective trustee.

The recruitment process is critical. If done in a haphazard manner that lacks focus, the organization will not be able to attract the people most needed to serve on the board. Here are some factors to consider:

- **Gender:** It is important to have diversity on the board. Representation on the board should reflect the makeup of the organization's constituency. It is not only the politically right thing to do; it will also enhance the organization in numerous ways.

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- **Age:** A range of ages most likely is a healthy way to build the board. All too often boards are made up of older people. Generally a range of ages adds different perspectives and depth.
- **Occupation:** Does the board include expertise and experience in areas that will be helpful? There is value in having different occupations represented; just be sure that you have members with knowledge of finance, marketing, facilities, and other beneficial areas.
- **Ethnicity:** Ethnic diversity adds to the board and to the organization in meaningful ways. Having representation from different ethnic groups demonstrates an understanding of the various contributions that can be enormously constructive and beneficial.
- **Recommendation source:** Is the person making the recommendation someone whose opinion is valued and who has the best interest of the organization, as opposed to someone who wants to pad their particular agenda?
- **Other board affiliations and interests:** Potential board members have their own sphere of influence—which can be extremely helpful. Be sure you capture this information in the recruitment process. If a prospective board member has served or is currently serving on another board, that information may reveal his or

her ability to be an effective and supportive board member.

- ***Strengths and specific areas of contribution:*** A matrix identifying needs and strengths allows the board to be intentional about what skills and abilities are most needed. For example, if a capital campaign is on the horizon, those with knowledge of fundraising, construction, and facilities management might be sought.

The process of securing a commitment from a prospective board member is one that requires great care. Here are several examples of ways to determine the compatibility of a prospect with the organization and staff:

Invite the person to attend an event.

An appropriate priority in recruitment is to find out all you can about a prospective board member. One of the ways to do this is to invite the person to attend an event—either at the location of the organization or elsewhere. The purpose is to begin to introduce the prospective board member (assuming they are not already completely familiar with the organization) to key staff, donors, volunteers, and, of course, other board members.

Seek the candidate’s assistance or input on a committee.

Many nonprofit organizations have great success by including non-trustees on board committees. The organization may be seeking the input from someone with specific expertise. The organization may recognize the value of someone who may not

have the time commitment needed to serve on the board. And, the organization may ask a non-trustee with the idea of looking at the person as being a potential trustee in the future.

Invite the candidate to meet other board members, the CEO, and the development and marketing staff.

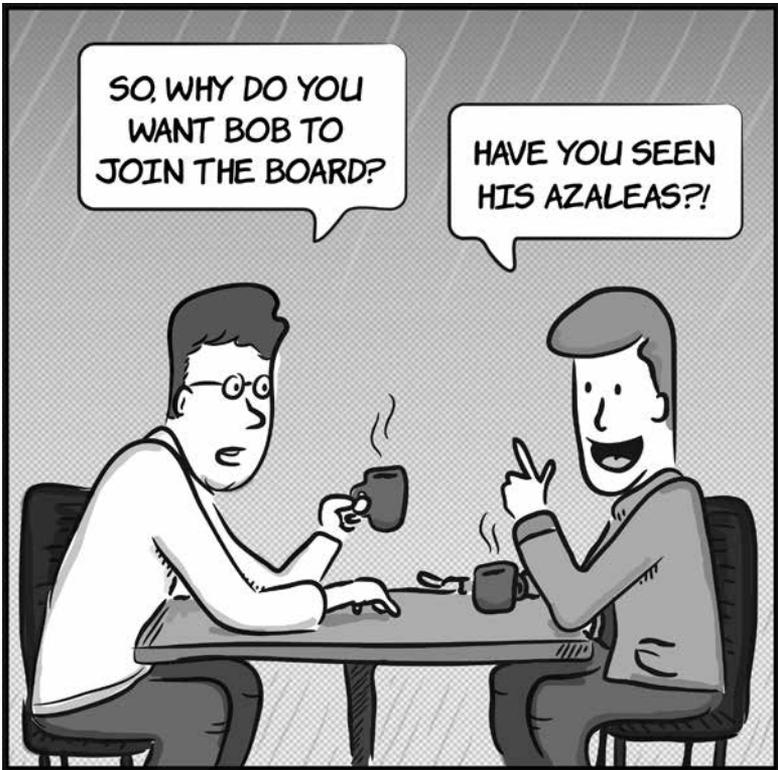
Beyond meeting people at an event it is very important that prospective trustees have opportunities to get to know the organization's leadership. This is important for several reasons, not the least of which is that it speeds up the process of becoming more informed about the mission, vision, and programs of the organization.

Offer a tour of the facilities.

Part of the candidate's becoming informed is to see and tour the organization's facilities. It demonstrates a commitment by making the effort to physically see the organization—it is a component of increasing their knowledge of the organization.

A member of the committee on trustees (perhaps the chair) and the CEO should invite the candidate to meet them. A personal invitation to meet these two individuals should be a strong signal that the organization takes the process of adding trustees very seriously. Is this process time-consuming? Yes. Is this process essential to the future of the organization? Absolutely—recruiting the best possible trustee will have an enormous impact!

Following the candidate's agreement to serve and approval by the full board, a separate letter of welcome should be sent from the board chair and CEO. The letter should outline arrangements for the board orientation session.



CASE STUDY #1

“We have an opening on our board...”



Linda and her husband had moved into their condominium just a few months ago. They loved the location and the fact that their new yard was a small one. Linda enjoyed gardening but especially enjoyed having a confined space to tend her garden. She also really enjoyed the fact that one of the responsibilities of the homeowner’s association was mowing and landscaping not only the common ground of the complex but also each individual yard. This enabled Linda to focus her outside energy on having the nicest garden possible.

One morning as she was outside working, a neighbor walked by and stopped to talk with her. Linda had never met him, but he was nice and very complimentary of the appearance of the garden and the overall exterior of her condominium. As they were discussing the issue of plants, trees, and the importance of such matters, he suddenly shifted gears. He unexpectedly announced that, “We have an opening on the homeowner’s association board and wondered if you would be interested in being a member?”

Linda looked at him a long moment and thought to herself, *Is this the most effective way to recruit board members? How serious could this board be when he is asking someone he just met and knows nothing about?* Finally she replied, “Thank you for