



StrengthenND[®]

NANCY'S NONPROFIT "HOT TOPICS" NOTES

This article is called, "YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT?" because it just makes sense to create a clear expectation of what we need from individuals who you ask to volunteer to serve on your board.

I am the Director of Nonprofit Education on the Strengthen ND Team. My name is Nancy Rakness, and to give you a little background of my professional development, I am now the retired CEO of the Northwest ND Girl Scout Council. In 1985 as I was graduating from MSU, I was hired by a 22 member, volunteer board to lead a regional nonprofit. The previous director retired after 13 years of service, and they were looking for someone who did not know how the organization was run in the past and someone who would transition the nonprofit into corporate and strategic planning.

At the time, our National CEO was Frances Hesselbein. She rose from volunteer troop leader to National CEO and held the position for thirteen years. I was one of 315 CEO's leading regional councils across the nation, and I was the youngest executive director, I had so much to learn! We had management consultants who worked with us and provided us with the tools and support to develop our local nonprofit. Our local council covered 14 counties with 2,500 members and 500 registered adults. I was fortunate to have the support of our national team, or I surely would have failed.

Under Frances's leadership, our organization was transformed into a forward focused nonprofit that measured desired outcomes, and we learned how to meet internal and external challenges together.

I have always meant to share what I learned from all of the professional development that I received with others in the nonprofit world once I retired. I have to thank Megan and Cher at SND for this opportunity.

If you are able to take even one thing from any professional development events that you attend and actually use it, you are taking intentional steps to move your organization forward.

So, back to my learning curve.

When I think back to the first time that I was asked to join a nonprofit board, the individual who called me asked right off the bat if I would volunteer to serve as their Board President.

Although I was a little flattered, I asked why she would even call me and ask such a question. Her quick response was this, "you are an Executive Director of a similar nonprofit so you must have the knowledge and skills to lead our organization as board chair". I had not even been on the job for 30 days and I was just getting ready to attend new executive director orientation with national staff... and so I wondered; what IS this world of the nonprofit board all about? The call to serve caught me off guard. There was absolutely no way that I was qualified to serve on their board in 1985, nor did I have the time available to do so. I declined the request. Hopefully, individuals that WE asked to join our board never had the experience that I had, but who knows. Giving a potential volunteer time to find out

who, what, when, why, and how about your organization will likely give you desired results when making the ask.

National staff helped me to understand my leadership role and the governance responsibilities of the board. Our admin and I provided support to the executive committee and the board chair whom I developed a professional, working relationship with, based on mutual respect and trust.

Through the years I supported the nominating committee, by meeting with the president and together we carried out a confidential assessment of current skills, regional representation, and succession planning. The president communicated with the nominating committee chair and that individual was an ex-officio member of our board without vote.

LESSONS LEARNED ALONG THE WAY – WHAT NOT TO DO

- **Elect board members who are warm bodies** when you need people who are dependable, and willing to own their fiduciary responsibility and make time to get things done. Warm bodies show up to some of the meetings, but they are not engaged in what is going on with the nonprofit.
- **Retain members in name only.** Their connection with the nonprofit was just not there from the start. Name dropping and asking for recommendations to achieve geographical representation is risky, especially if you were willing to take anyone just to fill the vacancy. These board members just don't show up, ever. We finally set a policy that was written into our bylaws, if you miss three board meetings without calling in and being excused, you were automatically relieved of your board duties and replaced. This did not happen often, but when it did, it was good to move on with a replacement.
- **Receiving a name at a board meeting and approving** the individual for board service without finding out how the individual will contribute to the success of the nonprofit.
- **Rush to fill an unexpired term.** If we did not take the time to interview and create the right expectation, we paid a price.
- **Skipping due diligence** when approving an individual for board service may hinder the future success of the nonprofit. Ongoing no shows for meetings, lack of quorum, lack of follow-up and lack of interest whereas, the position may have been filled with someone who would represent the nonprofit well and enjoy being engaged in the work of the board.
- **How is conflict handled?** Over the years, I can remember two individuals who were highly critical of operational matters and the one tried to grandstand at the meetings. This made other board members uncomfortable. Our professional Board Chair kept us on the agenda by stating that she would give the individual time to visit with her in private immediately after the meeting adjourned. The Board Chair would listen to their concerns, establish next steps to either file a written complaint and also set a date when she would get back to the volunteer, or the matter was resolved from the one meeting. One individual resigned because she was not going to be allowed to grandstand at the board meetings, the other got on the bus and supported the work of the board.
- We worked with 175 troop leaders and 6 operational volunteers. There is always potential for conflict when there are safety rules, risk management procedures, and planning deadlines to

be met when working with other people's children. We used an organizational chart to help board members, operational volunteers, and staff understand where to go to resolve conflict. Our aim was to carry out board meetings that were positive and productive, and we have very low turnover of board members. **Retaining engaged board members** required having the right person in the position of Board President. Review your succession plan regularly to make sure that you are prepared for resignations, illness, people moving, etc.

- Having representation from your clients or operational volunteers is good, but the conflict of interest exists, and if it is in your bylaws, they may be appointed by the board to represent the people that you serve as ex-officio members, without voting privileges. You want to be able to discuss budgets and increasing program fees without having to convince individuals who pay for your services at your board meetings. Ex-officio members can have time on the board agenda to report in how the programs or services are working. A red flag is a potential operational volunteer who is overly concerned with operational activities. If they are appointed by the board, they can be replaced by the board. There is a clear line between meddling in operations and board governance. **The intention here is to retain your dedicated staff and board members** by minimalizing conflict and negativity.

PERSONAL PASSION FOR THE MISSION IS KEY!

For me, it was interesting to learn that several of our most dedicated donors and board members had no children, yet they were very committed to our mission, and they had could easily share talking points about the value of our programs.

Our strongest board members had served on other nonprofit boards, they were professionals who appreciated our mission, and our vision, for the girls that we served.

It takes time to build a relationship with a potential volunteer, to determine if they are willing to give you the time that it takes to make a difference, and if they have the knowledge and skills to meet governance responsibilities. Some nonprofits have an interview process and a written application that is submitted to the nominating committee. I highly recommend both.

So, what are some best practices to recruit great board members who may fit into our leadership succession plan? Here are some things that I would want to find out about your nonprofit before agreeing to serve on your board:

1. **What** is your purpose and history? Why does your organization exist? What are the intended results? **I am wondering if I am passionate about your mission.** Being passionate about the mission is the best way to steward the organization to meet the challenges of what ever may impact the overall organization. **What is it** that made you most passionate about this nonprofit that you wanted to serve on this board?
2. **Who** do you serve and **how** do you do it? Do you have a program calendar of activities that you can share with me so I can grasp who you carry out your purpose statement? May I attend one of your program events so that I can experience how you are fulfilling your mission and see what your nonprofit actually does?
3. Are board meetings an opportunity for the board to do the board's work rather than the board doing the staffs' work?

4. What is the current status of your nonprofit? Is it new, do you have a strategic plan that includes a capital campaign in the future? Where do operating funds come from?
5. **How** does your board operate? What are the terms of your board and what does the board structure look like, do you provide the option to attend board meetings via ZOOM? Does this board send out pre-board meeting packets either by mail or shared online? How long are your board meetings, are meetings well organized and carried out within an hour? **When** does your board meet and how often? Do you have a standing meeting date that I can schedule around so I can attend?
6. Do you have a (preferably three year) board calendar, that lists standing board meeting dates, all committees, and when they meet, scheduled board fundraising activities, and a rotating (3 year) list of policy reviews scheduled so that I may determine how my talents, skills and gifts will fit in? I am wondering how your board gets governance responsibilities done and if you are compliant with the IRS.
7. **What is expected** in the area of making an annual financial contribution to your nonprofit? Some volunteers will work events, bring food, chair committees and task groups, but not be able to make a significant financial contribution. I am not an events person; I would rather give a larger financial gift and work on policy task groups rather than work fund development events. I may consider serving as an officer of the board and possibly board chair, once I have a good understanding of where your organization is now, and where it needs to go in the next 5 years.
8. Does your organization have proof of Directors and Officers Insurance and Risk Management in place? Official Certificate of Proof of Insurance may be requested.
9. **May I fill out an application** to share my knowledge, skills, and experience with you and then meet with someone to learn more about your organization? What is the timeline for me to join your board, do you provide formal training for new board members and the opportunity for me to get to know other members of this board? If so, the answer is yes! I am excited to get on the bus!!!

Just to recap: look for the passion, create the right expectation of who you are and what you do and what your nonprofit needs

<https://blueavocado.org/board-of-directors/in-the-boardroom-asked-to-join-that-board/>
<https://blueavocado.org/board-of-directors/a-board-member-contract/>
<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/tools-resources/finding-the-right-board-members-your-nonprofit>

If you would like to participate in **Nonprofit Hot Topics** which are open discussions that are participant driven starting at 11:00 am to noon on the 4th Thursday of each month. Check Strengthen ND's FB page to register and receive the ZOOM invite. I encourage you to contact me at: nancy@strengthennd.com if you would like a certain subject discussed at any of the forums. I can also add you to my email list for ongoing notification of Hot Topics

Look for future webinars by checking the Strengthen ND website or our Facebook page.

Thank you for your participation today!