

# Recruiting Effective Board Members

by Gary Bess and Cindy Ratekin

**W**hen you have a vacant staff position at your child care center, what do you do? Most agencies will place a classified advertisement in the help wanted section of their local newspaper with qualifications and duties specified. When it comes to recruiting qualified volunteer board of directors members, however, classified ads are hardly appropriate, and the same intensity of position promotion and candidate selection is seldom as seriously undertaken.

The contradiction between the seriousness by which child care agencies approach personnel management and their lack of attention to board management often creates an imbalance in organizational leadership and effectiveness.

## **Do we need more members?**

The size of a board of directors can range from as few as three members to 30 or more. The decision of board membership size depends on a lot

of factors, including history (Houle, 1989). Your bylaws prescribe minimum and maximum sizes, though like other rules of governance, they can be changed. The decision is really a matter of board and staff functioning. As Houle (1989) states, the board "should be small enough to act as a deliberative body."

It is sometimes argued that small boards are often cohesive, with members actively working amid a spirit of collaboration. What the board lacks in size and formality, it

makes up for with enthusiasm and directed action. Organizations at an early period in their development are sometimes characterized by small committed boards.



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At other times, boards are seen as a legitimizing and legalistic necessity for non-profits, with members recruited by the agency's director or founding member with little intention of sharing real power with the members. They sign on to play a "most perfunctory role" in the organization's governance (Edwards, Yankey, & Altpeter, 1998). Board recruits join based on their relationship with the founder and their support of the agency's purpose, without expectations that they will be active stewards. They may be there if called upon, but are also content to serve in name only.

Large boards, on the other hand, represent an opportunity to diversify member representation and responsibility, while maximizing resource acquisition. Organizations that have small staffs, lack critical paid expertise, or rely upon community support, sometimes have larger boards. In order for a large board to function well, there generally is the need for the maintenance of a formal governance structure. This responsibility can either fall on the shoulders of child care center staff in larger organizations or, in smaller agencies, on a few key volunteers.

Members on large boards are sometimes drawn from the community and the clients the child care center serves; while at other times, persons with valued expertise that complement current members and staff are recruited. In both instances, a large membership helps to legitimize the child care center's presence among donors. Board members with specific expertise are enlisted in a variety of tasks from financial management to planning to resource development. Large boards often signify an ongoing and community-dependent resource development program.

## What do we need from new members?

One way to begin the recruitment process is to clearly identify the board's needs, skills, professional qualifications, and/or interests (Houle, 1989). These decisions are as individual as are the non-profit agencies that seek new members. While it is generally considered beneficial to have, for example, an attorney, a CPA, a community relations expert, or fund raiser on the board, even these skills must be considered in light of the child care center's needs.

Attorneys, for example, are not experts in all facets of the law and thus are not equally conversant on matters of contracts, professional liability, human resources management, wills and estates, and non-profit corporate law. Boards must carefully think through what specific expertise is most needed. Similarly, a CPA may be recruited to serve as treasurer or chair of the finance committee, but he may not know much about investments, planned giving, or fund accounting (a common form of non-profit bookkeeping). And, of course, once a CPA is made a member, she is precluded from performing the organization's independent audit due to the appearance of conflict of interest.

To begin the new member recruitment process, board members may wish to develop a matrix of present and desired attributes as a guide (Houle, 1989). This is an opportunity to inventory the skills of current board members and to identify gaps to be filled by new recruits. It is important to note that representation is not one-dimensional — members and candidates often bring to the board more than one desired attribute. A community relations expert, for

example, who advises on publicity, marketing of services, and who has media contacts, may also represent a designated category such as "parent" or "neighborhood resident."

Figure 1 is an example of a Board Member Profile, a matrix of each member's qualities to assess the board's current strengths. The left column lists desired information on current members, while the horizontal field at the top allows the board to assess each member relative to these categories. Based on your child care center's values and needs, the form can be modified.

Utilizing the Board Member Profile as a guide, the Board Skill Inventory (Figure 2) can be completed. This instrument allows you to acknowledge your board's current strengths (on which you wish to build) and to begin to target those areas where representation is desired. Among the challenges of this process is that if you have a small board, you must choose from among several desired skills or try to find individuals who represent more than one talent. Larger boards allow you to target individuals with one primary attribute, though a caution here is that you also want members to strongly support all facets of the board's concern and not be a single-issue representative.

The Board Skill Inventory lists desired attributes in the left column, followed by columns where current board expertise/representation can be noted and where it is needed. The far right column allows the board to indicate potential candidates or possible sources for recruitment. Board members may sometimes wish to develop a priority ranking of possible new members, contacting each in order. In other instances, the board may recognize that more than

Figure 1

## Child Care Agency Board Member Profile

*Directions: Complete this profile for your board and see if it reflects the diverse people and community you serve.*

Board Member:	1	2	3	4
Board member name:				
Term ends:				
Board office / position currently held:				
Member since:				
Gender / ethnicity:				
Current occupation:				
Interests / special abilities:				
Other voluntary involvements:				
Willing to continue on board?				
Contributions to the board:				
Comments about board service:				

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one new member is needed to fill a specific slot. Here, the board can concurrently recruit potential new members.

### **How do we begin recruiting?**

Now that you know what types of persons are needed, how do you go about identifying and recruiting them? Most bylaws specify a board membership range, term length, duties of officers, frequency of meetings, and sometimes even member representation (e.g., parents of children, low-income persons, or residents of certain neighborhoods). They usually do not specify, however, the process by which members are to be recruited. Non-profit boards of directors are unique in this regard as they generally are not elected by a membership (though some are, such as parent co-operatives), nor do they actively encourage unsolicited applications for members. The board is in essence a self-perpetuating body, whereby new members are invited by current members to share in the responsibility of child care center governance.

Classified ads, though not out of the question, are not a very purposeful or private approach. There actually are several means of recruitment, which can be divided into two primary categories: (a) recruitment of specific individuals and (b) recruitment of individuals by type.

The specific individuals recruitment approach references persons in the community who are known to members or who have been suggested by friends and supporters as potentially being interested in membership. By contrast, individuals by type refers to a target skill area or specific constituency representation such as financial, legal, community relations, community resident, ethnic/racial person, or parent, where

the candidate has not as yet been identified, though criteria for the open slot have been established.

If the individual is known, it is necessary to approach him (preferably through your mutual contact), inquiring about his interest in child care in general and in serving on the board of directors in particular. It is up to the current board to decide how explicit an offer of membership it is prepared to make to the candidate. Some organizations invite prospects to first serve on a standing or ad hoc committee so that they can be observed as part of a task group before an invitation to join is extended. Others invite candidates to a meeting of the board or to a reception where board membership expectations are presented, along with an in-depth introduction to the child care center, its services, and the children and families that it serves.

Boards often identify an individual by type without a clear idea of where to find such a person. A board slot for a business leader, for example, has been designated, and yet no one seems to know anyone to fill it. There are several approaches to this quandary. One is to broadly reach out to businesses and corporations through their owners' / presidents' office or through their community relations departments. This is a cold call where you state that your organization is looking for volunteer board members and would welcome a nomination from the company. Large companies are often interested in identifying opportunities for their rising executives, and smaller companies are sometimes interested in improving ties with their local community.

Another way is to identify likely persons by soliciting suggestions from elected officials or from other community leaders who may be

willing to place an initial call on the child care center's behalf or who will allow it to use their name when making the call. Still another source for identifying members is the business or community sections of daily newspapers or weekly throw-away newspapers that spotlight local residents. Using this approach, you can either place a cold call to the prospect or try to identify a mutual acquaintance, possibly by going to community leaders who may know the prospect.

It is extremely important during this courtship phase that current members clearly convey their and the agency's expectations of new board members (Houle, 1989). For example, members may be required to attend monthly board meetings and to serve on at least one board committee that also meets monthly. They may also be expected to make an annual donation to the child care center (possibly at a minimally prescribed level), to work on one or more special events or fund raisers, or to attend events such as chamber of commerce meetings, community forums, or represent the agency to elected or appointed officials.

A Board Job Description (Figure 3) can be a helpful tool for conveying to prospective members the serious business nature of the organization's expectations. It also removes any future doubt that they have not fully communicated board member duties and responsibilities, and differentiates between board policy and staff policy development (Carver, 1990).

It is often a delicate situation of inquiring with a candidate about her qualifications for board membership followed by a decision not to invite the applicant onto the board. It is thus important to qualify your inquiry with a statement such as "we are approaching several

Figure 2

## Child Care Agency Board Skill Inventory

*Directions: Use this form to profile your board's strengths and weaknesses, and to identify special skills that your board lacks. Under each area, list board members who fill that area of expertise. During recruitment, seek out new board members to fill the voids.*

Background:	Expertise we have	Expertise we need to have	List candidates or possible sources for recruitment
Financial	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Marketing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Parent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Fund Raising	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Public Relations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Media	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Legal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Health Care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Public Policy/Legislative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Community Involvement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____
Other: _____ _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____ _____

individuals in our community to identify a few who have the time and expertise to join our board of directors." Or, with less commitment, you can say "we are approaching several individuals in our community to volunteer in a variety of capacities with our organization." Regardless of your approach, however, you certainly do not want to alienate an individual who may represent a potential benefit to your organization, though not necessarily as a board member.

Board member recruitment can be undertaken with the same success as new child care staff hiring, with similar preparation and directed activity. The result will be a stronger board composed of committed leaders who complement one another with skill, expertise, and divergent interests.

The challenge now is how to orient and evaluate new board members. This topic will be addressed in an upcoming article on "Evaluating Your Child Care Agency Board of Directors."

## References

Carver, J. (1990). *Boards that make a difference — A new design for leadership in nonprofit and public organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Houle, C.O. (1989). *Governing boards*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Matheson, W., Van Dyk, C., & Millar, K. (1995). *Performance evaluation in the human services*. New York: Haworth Press.

Figure 3

### Sample Board Job Description

**POSITION:** Member, Board of Directors

**REPORTS TO:** President, Board of Directors

**TERM:** Two years

**DUTIES:**

1. Select, support, and evaluate the agency's director.
2. Come to each board meeting prepared to discuss the business before the board.
3. Attend all scheduled meetings and special meetings where board member representation is required.
4. Review and approve the agency's annual operating budget, financial reports, and annual independent audit.
5. Approve contracts and agreements for the agency.
6. Participate in the agency's strategic planning process and abide by the decisions made.
7. Help ensure the financial solvency of the agency by:
  - a. Actively participating in the fund-raising process.
  - b. Contributing to the agency as a donor.
  - c. Overseeing the fiscal management of the agency.
8. Promote the agency among donors, other influential persons, and the community at large.
9. Always represent the interests of service beneficiaries when making decisions.
10. Participate in a periodic self-assessment and evaluation of one's own contribution to the board.
11. Participate on one or more standing committees of the board.
12. Provide advice and consultation to other members and the agency director.

**QUALIFICATIONS:**

A commitment to the mission of the agency and those who benefit from its services. Ability to work collaboratively as a team member. Adequate time to devote to the organization.