

A Work in Progress

To build a better board, recruit better candidates. A dynamic, ongoing nomination process will help.

By David Kushner, CAE



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You've just navigated the nomination process, either as a new board member or on your way up your association's leadership structure. So surely you won't have to think about nominations for another year, will you? And if anything does come up, a group of past leaders will take care of it, right?

Wrong. A dynamic nomination process is the foundation of any solid board and essential for maintaining the vitality of your organization's leadership. It must be an ongoing activity for the entire board.

The nominating process must be open, transparent, and widely communicated to all parties.

In a May 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Building Better Boards," David A. Nadler explained the rationale this way: "The high-performance board, like the high-performance team, is competent, collegial, and focused on an unambiguous goal. Such entities do not simply evolve; they must be constructed to an exacting blueprint ... called board building."

You are part of the crew building a board that will, in the future, replace you and your colleagues. As you develop or refine your nomination procedures, focus on these five points.

A critical, ongoing role for all board members is to seek new leaders. Nominations are not a once-a-year activity. Discussing future leadership requires consistent attention, not just the time you can squeeze into a portion of a single board meeting. To help raise the profile of the nomination process, you and your

fellow board members should offer names from among your contacts and consider possible candidates throughout the year.

The nominating process must be open, transparent, and widely communicated to all parties. One sometimes hears the complaint that nonprofit boards are made up of small cliques. The perception—and often the reality—is that the same people fill key roles, sometimes moving from the association board to a related foundation board. To avoid

this pitfall and to encourage candidates throughout your membership or community, your board must communicate about the nomination process as effectively and as widely as possible.

A research-based book published by ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership, *7 Measures of Success: What Remarkable Associations Do That Others Don't*, tested the conventional wisdom that boards should be selected through a democratic process. Surprisingly, the findings did not support this belief. In fact, the study identified no specific selection process as best; it recognized instead that "remarkable associations are highly effective in maintaining transparency and communicating how the process for identifying and recruiting capable, credible, and competent leaders works."

The board must set criteria for entry to measure all candidates fairly. An addi-

tional way to preempt complaints of cliquishness is to make sure you evaluate candidates fairly. It is the governing board's duty to establish specific criteria that potential board candidates must meet. These criteria may include experience in the industry or profession, volunteer work in your association, or leadership at the chapter level. You may also develop demographic criteria, including gender, minority status, or professional affiliations that should be represented on the board.

Before adding new members, the board should conduct an annual performance assessment that examines both individual members and the governing body as a whole. Once the assessment is complete, the board should offer help to its members who need assistance, counsel those who are not actively involved or who display unacceptable behaviors, and weed out those who are not performing. Too often, boards fail to make tough decisions about colleagues, and ultimately, the organization suffers as a result.

The board should provide clear guidance to the nominating committee. To ensure that you have the proper mix of skills, experience, and other attributes, you must inform the nominating committee about specific needs for such areas as financial or fundraising experience. One way to do this is to prepare an annual summary of the current board's makeup, including both demographics and skills. Then identify members whose terms are concluding in the current year. The result will be the blueprint you need to build both a better nominating process and a better board.

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