

What an Incoming Volunteer Board Chair Needs to Know About Their Board Members

Volunteer Boards (VBs) face unique challenges. They include:

1. They receive no compensation for their time or travel
2. They are asked to make (sometimes significant) financial contributions to the organization as a condition of membership
3. They may not have the right skills or experience, but are passionate about the mission and want to help
4. The quality of their contributions (except for their financial giving) is typically not assessed. There are no consequences for exceptionally good or bad performance
5. They are hard to fire!

What an Incoming Volunteer Board Chair Needs to Know About Their Board Members:

WHAT
DO YOU
NEED TO
KNOW



Diversity on the Board matters. That can take the form of assuring there is a representative mix of gender, age, marital status, occupation, economic status.

Skills and knowledge – may or may not be job-based, including social skills. There are many different ways to define these -- we will provide some potential structures in subsequent articles.

Social/community connections – can be job-based, or social networks

Degree of commitment to the Board – just nominal, or serious commitment; or willing to contribute even more, either in time and effort, or financial

How the individual's satisfaction is derived: simple praise, recognition, publicity, additional involvement in the Board's functioning. Beware of the "dark side" motivations -- power, greed, padding their resume, etc. so Board Chair is prepared for these.

Why is this Board Chair Knowledge Critical?

Volunteer Board members are not paid financially; they join for other reasons. The Chair needs to know those reasons, so to know how to reward individual members for their effort.

Different Board members desire different rewards.

Because volunteer board members are not compensated financially, their efforts must be rewarded in ways most meaningful to each member.

How does an Incoming Board Chair Acquire the Needed Information about each Board Member?

Simple demographic information is easily collected by a one-page form; the rest is not so easy.

The remaining desired information must come from one-on-one conversations with each member. The conversation needs to be purposeful, follow a plan to extract desired information, and form a foundation for a future relationship with the member. It should be informal, friendly, and of sufficient duration so there can be a thoughtful exchange of ideas.

Immediately following the conversation, the Chair should make extensive notes to record the information described above.

Note: The Chair needs to have this conversation with each individual board member – this should not be delegated.

When choosing a volunteer Board Chair, the Board must make clear to candidates the time and effort required to do a good job.

*We hope this post is the catalyst for a larger conversation about this topic as well as other challenges facing Volunteer Boards. Please “comment” with your thoughts. Other articles in the series can be found on LinkedIn **#VolunteerBoards** or at www.larrysolow.com.*

Written by Warren Wilhelm and Lawrence (Larry) Solow