

Board of Directors

How to Select First Rate Board Members

by Joan Garry

Are you struggling with your board? Let's build the board of your dreams! Attend my free workshop, "[How to Overcome a Dysfunctional Board](#)".



This is one of my kids trying out PhotoBooth years ago. But also exactly how you feel when a nightmare board member opens her mouth.

The nightmare board member. We've all met her. We call her the nightmare board member because we have nightmares about her.

She's been your colleague at the table. She's filled out your performance review. And my, does she have a lot of opinions about strategy, operations, and the performance of the receptionist.

Especially for someone who hasn't stepped foot in your offices or attended a committee meeting in months.

She checks her iPhone during the program presentation. She asks for explanations she's already been given multiple times. She badmouths the organization and its leadership outside the boardroom. She doesn't know an asset from a liability. She has a goldmine rolodex but won't open it up (not for your organization, at least.) And when discussions of the big upcoming fundraiser come up, you can count on her to ask why you've never been able to secure Barbra or Meryl.

How did this nightmare board member find her way to your board in the first place?

More importantly, how can you fix it?

Here's a solution.

But first, let's discuss a key thing you've been doing wrong. Something that got you into this mess in the first place.

You're forgetting that board interviews are INTERVIEWS!

Tell the truth. You've been in prospect interviews where the prospect couldn't get a word in edgewise. Right? You're not interviewing at all. You're selling.

BOARD INTERVIEWS: THE WRONG WAY

If you've ever heard yourself saying the following in a board interview, you're doing it wrong:

1. **The time commitment is not onerous. The committees don't meet that often and a lot of times you can "phone in."**
2. **This is a great organization!** (If lucky, the interviewer can tell the prospect why)
3. **The other board members are terrific and lots of fun.**
4. **Yes, there is a fundraising commitment, but....**

A therapist once told me something important. Insert the word BUT into a sentence and you invalidate every word of the sentence that precedes it. "I love you, but..."

So what's wrong here? Almost everything.

You learn nothing about the prospect.

You sound desperate.

You are not honest or clear about the obligations.

QUESTIONS YOU WISH YOU COULD ASK

So what are the *right* questions? Before we get to that, here's what we *wish* we could ask.

I hope you forward this to your chair of Board Governance right after you read this article.

- Are you rich? I mean, like *really* rich. We need really rich people on our board.
- Can you assure us that you won't ask any really stupid questions at a board meeting?
- Do you *really* like to hear yourself talk?
- When someone says something you disagree with, do you either sigh or roll your eyes?
- How many times in the last month have you been on a conference call, hit the MUTE button, and checked your email?
- Will you commit to agreeing with absolutely everything I say? (Asked by the E.D.)
- Do you tend to assume that someone is doing a terrible job until proven otherwise?
- Does the idea of asking someone for money make your skin crawl?
- Do you care if you are late for stuff?
- **Note: join the fun and add a comment with a question YOU wish you could ask.**

That was fun.

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO ASK

OK, so let's get to the meat of it. What questions should you ask in a board interview to get the best possible board members? Here are six critical interview questions for non profit board members.

- **What do you know about our organization?** Why are you interested in committing your time and energy to us?
- **What do you think are the characteristics of a great board member?**
- **Fundraising is a significant obligation of board service (state give/get clearly).** Can you tell us about your experience in fundraising? Here, you need to dig and probe. Helping her daughter sell Girl Scout cookies does not count. Selling wrapping paper for her son? Nope. Ask what it looked like. Ask about comfort level.

- **Would you be willing to attend a lunch with the E.D. in which the goal was to make a major donor ask?**
- **Board members bring experience, wisdom, strategic thinking, and their rolodexes. Can you tell us about yours?** (You're probing here for who is in it and how willing the prospect is to share it.)
- **What kind of autonomy do you have over your calendar?** There will be meetings between board meetings, occasional donor lunches.

If you ask me, the single biggest problem with interviewing board candidates is that they are not interviews at all. Candidates come to "interviews" assuming that the job is theirs if they want it. The committee sells and persuades and typically does not vet the candidate in any substantive way. And real discussions about the fundraising obligation are swept under the rug for fear of chasing a good prospect away.

Come on folks. Can we please remember that board service is a privilege? That working on behalf of your organization is a gift. That public service is core to the betterment of our society.

I'd say "man up," but that would be sexist.