



Best Practices to Re-Energize Your Board by Valerie M. Plomin, Ph.D.

Great board members are invaluable and should be treated as such. But even the greatest board members can grow complacent if forced to sit at meeting after meeting that are identical in nature, one a carbon copy of the other in format and general scope. So every now and then, you need to “change it up”, plan something a little different, look beyond the monthly scheduled “business” and think out of the box. Here are a few suggestions that I have found to work.

- ***Let volunteers get to know one another: use an Introductory Exercise, form a Hospitality Committee***

Don't assume just because your board members see each other at monthly meetings that they know each other. Here's an Introductory Exercise that I particularly like because it helps board members to begin to associate each member with something other than just a name. Plan a few minutes, preferably at the beginning of the meeting, where members have an opportunity to share with each other. Pair them up and then give them about ten minutes to talk to each other about how they spend their weekends, their hobbies and interests. Then take another few minutes to have each pair share, briefly, with the group.

- ***Increase recognition: it doesn't have to be costly, form a Recognition Committee***

Most often volunteer recognition is considered to be the job of staff. But for those boards without staff, and even those with staff, having volunteers decide on how volunteers should be recognized has its merit. Besides creating another opportunity for volunteers to become involved and active in a way completely different from fund raising and policy making, chances are that the volunteers will come up with better ideas than staff ever could. They will enjoy the recognition more as well because they have a stake in it.

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- ***Increase communication with volunteers: keep absent volunteers up-to-date &/or remove***

When board members are working hard every month and then have to take meeting time to “bring up to speed” a member that has missed three or more meetings, it is debilitating for those members that have made the commitment to attend meetings and participate. Ignoring the issue is just as damaging to others who may feel their consistent presence is diminished. Bringing the issue forward and dealing with it can clear the air and help active board members to understand that they are valued. Although removing an absentee board member should be handled carefully, in the long run it will help your board by giving you the opportunity to bring in “new blood.”

- ***Restate volunteers’ purpose: use a Mission Exercise, develop an Elevator Speech***

The Elevator Speech was a concept developed a while ago in a book called the “One Minute Manager”. The basic concept is that one should be able to tell about one’s organization – what it is and what it does – in the time it takes to take an elevator ride. The Elevator Speech can be very helpful for networking and is one more tool that will help your board members become effective fundraisers.


- ***Schedule outcome presentations: keep volunteers informed, share stories***

Sometimes we become so intent on “taking care of business” at board meetings, that we don’t take the time to remind each other why we are really there. Perhaps once per quarter, invite someone who can speak to the success of your agency, even if it means giving up fifteen or so minutes of meeting time. It’s the motivation that your board needs to keep up the pace.

- ***Change their environment: ask volunteers where else they might want to meet, give the task to the Hospitality Committee***

When you can’t afford the time to bring in a speaker, try setting the meeting up in a different environment. If you usually meet in the Board Room, think about meeting at a restaurant, or at someone’s house. Changing the environment in which we are accustomed, changes are innate responses, which can give an interesting twist to the outcome of your meeting.



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- ***Schedule a Board Assessment: bring in an outside facilitator &/or send out a survey***

Take the time to find out what your board is thinking, of the meetings, of the organization, of the staff, of each other. There are many ways to do this but often bringing in someone who is an objective facilitator helps to maintain a level playing field and make the experience beneficial for everyone.

- ***Recruit new members: involve the entire board, bolster the Nominating & Development Committee***

Even though you have a Nominating and Development Committee whose charge it is to recruit new members, it should really be an entire board effort. Besides the obvious that “more heads are better than one,” it allows the board to see that recruitment is more of a democratic process, rather than directed to a “chosen few.” In addition, it gives experienced board members an opportunity to “mentor” other board members thus increasing the “mentor’s” sense of value to the board while at the same time increasing solidarity among your board.

- ***Schedule a retreat: this can be a full day or a mini-retreat, involve the volunteers in the process***

Retreats can be used for many purposes and can be short half days or 3-4 days. What’s important is that the purpose as well as the probable outcome is clear to all prior to commitment so everyone feels this is something that has been agreed upon by all. Finally, make sure that the retreat is well planned and thought out. If you don’t have a professional on staff who can assist, consider bringing in a professional. Making good use of volunteers’ time is vital for continued board success.

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For assistance on re-energizing your board, contact ASK at 708-280-0465.