

Looking for Mr. Goodboard

(and Ms. Goodboard and Dr. Goodboard...)

By Judy Gooch

One of the most common challenges facing community-based organizations is finding good board members—people who don't just represent a diverse range of backgrounds and skills but who know the lay of the land and who truly *want* to serve. In TGCI's Strategic Fundraising Workshop, participants often ask, "Where do we even start looking?"

Here are some of the answers that others in the class have offered:

1. Ask your banker. The owner of a savings and loan or the regional head of some mega-bank may be otherwise occupied, but what about your local branch manager or a knowledgeable loan officer? In banks, as in many other businesses, middle-level managers are expected to become involved in civic activities. It's how they solidify ties with their communities. And bankers are useful "champions" when your organization needs to apply for a loan, a line of credit, or other forms of financial help.

2. Ask a realtor. As you drive around town, look for "For Sale" signs and pay attention to which firms—and which brokers or sales associates—turn up most often. Realtors don't just know property values, they know who's moving in, who's moving out, and who's moving up (or down). They can be very good at suggesting names to add to your membership solicitation list or your major gift prospect list.

3. Ask a lawyer. You're not trying to get free legal help—though sometimes you may, especially if he or she is familiar with estate planning and is willing to join your planned giving committee. It's strictly verboten for lawyers to spill confidential information about clients, but they may be able to suggest your organization as a bequest recipient if a client asks for ideas.

4. Ask your doctor. Physicians are usually very busy and even if they agree to serve, their ability to attend meetings may be limited. But if your agency's mission centers around some medical issue, you clearly need people with medical training on your board. And retired physicians are often looking for opportunities to share their expertise in meaningful ways. Your own doctor may be able to recommend a retired colleague, or you might check with the

— Page 1 of 4 —

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county medical society or an association of "emeritus" physicians affiliated with nearby hospitals or medical schools.

5. Ask your librarian. Librarians get to know a great deal about library patrons by the books they take out (as the framers of the so-called Patriot Act have unfortunately reminded us). Your friendly local librarian may be able to introduce you to folks who share, or could come to share, your passion for your agency's cause.

6. Identify a "dream team"—the people in town who are widely recognized for their volunteer service. Maybe they're the organizers of the annual fishing derby, prominent donors, fundraisers, eloquent speakers, hard workers, or the folks who other folks want to rub shoulders with. Make appointments to see at least a few of them. You probably won't get them to commit to your organization (though you may be pleasantly surprised every now and then). What they may give you is entree—to younger acquaintances who are interested in helping groups like yours. The "aging out" of board members is a perennial problem. Ask your dream team to help you identify and groom the next generation of community leaders.

7. Ask your own staff for client recommendations. If client representation is a requirement—for example, the HIV/AIDS service agency that must have at least two individuals who are HIV+ on the board—ask your program staff who they think might make a strong contribution to the board. (Even if your bylaws don't require it, client representation is a good idea; it helps ensure that your organization stays connected with the people you serve.) Sometimes the client who makes the most noise is a good as well as obvious choice. Other times, staff may identify the shy person who doesn't necessarily put herself forward, but who still has a lot to offer.

8. Ask someone from the media. All nonprofits can use good publicity, and while a reporter for the local paper won't be able to guarantee favorable coverage, or indeed any coverage at all, she certainly knows how to bring your agency to the attention of the media. A journalist or public relations professional can also help with damage control if something newsworthy but negative happens in connection with your organization.

9. Ask at the Chamber of Commerce. It's where you'll find rising management professionals and local business owners, all of whom have a stake in the quality of life in your community. Tell your story and see who responds.

10. Talk with your local United Way staff. In many cities—Houston is one example—the United Way holds an annual "volunteer fair" where nonprofits can publicize their need for volunteers of all sorts, including board members. Interested persons sign up, and then the agency can begin to get to know them. The United Way of Massachusetts Bay sponsors a BoardBank, which helps match the talents and interests of prospective board members with the needs of area nonprofits.

11. Talk with your community foundation. Program officers at community foundations are usually very willing to help. They're also great sources of technical assistance (some run workshops for new board members) and they know who's active in nonprofit affairs.

12. Revitalize, then recycle. Some of your current board members who appear to be disengaged simply may not have discovered their niche. Or they may have been dealing with family or work situations that left them with little free time. At least once a year, have a candid conversation with each member of the board to assess their interests and concerns. Match their talents with opportunities for them to shine.

And here are some *don'ts*.

1. Don't recruit people who say, "You can use my name. Just don't expect me to do anything." Sure, big names can help open doors ("Mrs. Famous suggested that I contact you about...."). And it's nice to have some mucky-muck as the honorary chair of the fundraising campaign or to have some celebrity as the "draw" for a special event. But to serve on the board, even Mrs. Famous needs to make a financial commitment. And to serve as honorary chair, she must—at the very least—show up at the event.

2. Don't just nominate your friends, unless each one has special strengths, skills and the potential for commitment to the cause. Socializing can be a nice reward of board membership, but friendship can get in the way of objective discussion. Besides, your agency probably needs to increase its visibility and its reach. Does your best friend move in the same circles you do? If the nominating committee has a long tradition of nominating friends, the executive director needs to have a frank discussion with, first, the board chair, and then the nominating committee.

3. Don't keep re-electing the same people out of inertia. Every board needs new blood. If your board doesn't have term limits, it should. If that's unlikely to happen before the next millennium, press for the establishment of "board member emeritus" status for those who have served the longest.

4. Don't just look for "people of means." Of course you want board members to be able to give generously. But money isn't the only criterion for board membership. Passion, commitment, a willingness to learn and work hard—and to give and help get—are all important.

5. Don't seek out board members with professional skills and expect them to give their services for free. Some may, but many would prefer to be loved for their other talents. Board service shouldn't be tantamount to going on a busman's holiday. I've turned down many requests to join boards because it was clear that I was only being asked because of my fundraising background—and the board thought it could save money if it didn't have to pay for a fundraiser.

6. Don't be discouraged if you've asked the executive director to help find likely prospects, only to get few or no suggestions. She may have professional experience and many professional contacts, but her contacts outside a particular program area may be limited. Or she may be operating under the misimpression that all board members have to be wealthy and she doesn't know many wealthy people. Or maybe she just prefers a familiar (rubber-stamp?) board and the thought of new board members is threatening. Addressing these issues requires frank discussion, centered on the many ways that an appropriately active board can advance the work of the organization.

Finally, make sure your organization has well-thought-out procedures for bringing new members on board once you've identified prospects. The interview process should include both board and staff. Discuss your expectations regarding participation, financial contributions, and help raising funds. Let prospective members know that you value their advice and expertise—not just their money. These steps will help ensure that board service is positive for them, for the organization, and for the broader community you serve.