

Governance

# Transforming Board Members Into Energized Partners

Two ways nonprofit leaders can develop better, more productive relationships with their boards.

By [Jeffrey C. Walker & Jennifer McCrea](#) | Aug. 12, 2013

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The board of a nonprofit organization can be one of its most powerful resources. But many boards are insufficiently connected to the work of the nonprofit, or connected in ways that hamper and stymie rather than support and energize the management team.

What can nonprofit leaders do to create a deeper and richer relationship with their boards? We suggest two basic steps as a good way to start the process.



First, *create opportunities for open dialogue with individual board members about their interests, needs, desires, and resources.* Too many nonprofit leaders fall into the habit of thinking of their board members as an undifferentiated mass rather than as the unique—often fascinating—individuals they are. You can break this habit and enrich your connections with the board by investing time in open, informal conversation with them. The purpose is to explore the answers to such questions as: How did you originally become interested in the work of our organization? What are the passions that motivate your participation in our work? What is your long-term vision for the future of our organization? The point of the discussion is simply for the participants to appreciate one another for the interesting and complex human beings that they are.

Second, *within the context of individual interests and passions, set goals for board members—and make them personalized and explicit.* Schedule an annual one-on-one conversation with each board member that resembles the performance review that most business managers conduct. The other party to the discussion might be the board chairman or some other representative of the board—for

example, the chairman of the membership committee. Focus on how the individual board member can express his unique interests through specific activities. Useful questions might include: What forms of involvement and support would you like to contribute to the organization in the coming year? What projects would you like to undertake? What could we do to make board membership more interesting and rewarding for you?

By the end of the conversation, participants should agree on a specific list of goals—including a financial goal that represents funds the board member will personally donate, raise from acquaintances, or both.

A good example of this board engagement in action is at Berklee College of Music, currently led by our friend Roger Brown. Brown says, “I challenged the board to step back from our day-to-day challenges and ask: How can we all elevate our game? More specifically: How can I, as the president, elevate my game? And what role can each board member play in helping, supporting, and guiding me?”

Brown’s first step was to initiate open dialogue with the board members using an interview guide:

We had the membership committee interview every single board member, in person if possible, using a simple interview guide that we created: What have you enjoyed about your Berklee experience? What could be better? Where do you think the college is doing a good job? Where could the college do better? How do you think Roger could do a better job? And what would you like to do? How do you think you could contribute to the next phase of Berklee’s story and elevate your own participation in your game?

Based on comments from the interviews, Brown and the membership committee chair decided to reorganize the board’s committee structure, de-emphasizing traditional standing committees in favor of ad hoc committees oriented toward specific short- or medium-term tasks. As a result, board members will perform research and present their findings to the rest of the board—by conducting interviews with important members of the Berklee community, for example, or by examining other universities that might provide useful benchmarks for Berklee. “The idea,” Brown explains, “is to ensure that board members are actively engaged in helping us build our future, as opposed to passively absorbing presentations and discussing ideas generated by other people.”

The next stage of the process was a goal-setting meeting with each board member. These conversations challenged board members to reach for a new, heightened degree of personal commitment. Brown explains:

One trustee commented, “You’re asking us all to contribute more of our time and energy. But I’m giving you all I can give.” I think that was really a positive moment. Prompting honest discussions like this is really a valuable part of the process. And over time, even people like that board member, who was skeptical about his ability to commit more time and energy, have gradually gotten on board. It’s the magic of raising expectations.

Energizing the board at Berklee College is still a work in progress. “I don’t pretend we’ve got it all figured out,” Brown says. “But many of our members are saying that Berklee’s board is the most fun and interesting board they’ve ever been on. I think that tells us we’re on the right path.”

Working closely to build a smart, engaged, and energized board takes time, energy, planning, follow-through, and continual communication. But if you build a truly great board, the value it generates will certainly outweigh the work it demands.

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