



Strategically Sparking Your Board's Commitment

Amy Kweskin June 2010



Three Essential Tools for Board Engagement

A basic myth of Board Development is that there is an ideal mix of individuals and your organization has yet to find them. At a recent Center for Cultural Innovation strategic planning program, a participant cleverly stated that every organization has three Boards, "the one you wish you had, the one you use to have and the one you do have."

Boards are dynamic and like your organization, are constantly evolving. Engaging Board members is a process of articulating your organization's vision, strategies and goals, identifying the necessary resources to move forward and engaging Board members to lead the pursuit.

The **strategic plan** is the backbone to the organization's annual activities, setting the Board's work plan. With it you can create a **Board matrix** of skills and resources to put the plan into action. From there, continued Board engagement is reinforced with **commitment worksheets** capturing their motivation and contribution to the organization.

These three tools are essential: strategic plan, Board matrix and commitment worksheet. However, not every organization has a strategic plan. If this is the case with your organization, creating one is a priority for the coming year. The Board matrix and commitment worksheets allow for tactical implementation of the strategic plan.

Strategic Plan - your organization's road map

The strategic plan is a roadmap for reaching the organization's vision, and this in turn provides direction for governance. The process involves hard work but the result is buy-in from the Board, staff, artists, funders, and other key constituents. To create a strategic plan, assemble a working group and identify a champion to move the planning process forward. Utilizing a consultant will ensure that the team stays on track.

Board matrix - getting to know you

With the strategic plan in hand a Governance Committee of three to five Board and staff members can create a **Board matrix**. This is a spreadsheet listing skills and resources your organization will need from your Board in order to implement the strategic plan.

The Board matrix includes...

- **Professional skills** such as special training, qualifications and certifications
- **Access to resources** which include people, funding and goods in-kind
- **Affiliations** that include memberships, networks, employers, and charities

List items from each of these three areas of focus in a column on the left side of the sheet. Across the top row type the names of your current Board members. Distribute the document to the full Board and ask them to place an "x" beneath their name when they fit a corresponding descriptor.

Make sure to leave space at the bottom for Board members to write additional skills and resources that they would like to bring to the table. Often this exercise is filled with personal and professional surprises, with trustees realizing for the first time that they have so much to offer.

Next, collect the forms and compile into one spreadsheet. Be mindful that sometimes people join Boards to



develop new skills, contacts and experiences. A rewarding Board experience is when individuals are utilizing existing resources while developing new ones. As the Governance Committee reviews the responses it will be clear that in some areas your Board has a wealth of resources and in other areas there may be a need for targeted cultivation of new members. Circle back to your Board members with the results, as the process of completing the worksheet may have sparked ideas of people in their network who could be pursued as new Board members.

Commitment worksheet - kindling the spark

People join Boards for many reasons and understanding your Board members' motivations is essential for fully engaging them in their leadership role. Surprisingly, it is not always alignment with the organization's mission that attracts people to join Boards. Often it can be to fulfil a socially motivated personal objective such as spending time with like-minded people. Other times it may be to build new skills and to be intellectually challenged. Helping your Board members understand their reason for getting involved is the key to engagement.

At the start of each Board term have Board members complete a confidential **commitment worksheet**. Although not legally binding it is an opportunity for the individual to reflect on their reasons for involvement and to articulate their goals for the coming year. This is an essential tool for the Board President and Executive Director to use when activating the strategic plan.

The commitment worksheet asks...

- What inspires you to be on the Board of this organization?
- What three goals do you hope to personally accomplish on the Board?
- What three objectives do you want the Board to accomplish as a team?
- What existing skills, expertise and resources do you most want to bring to the Board?
- What new skills or resources, if any, do you want to personally develop?
- What committee or working groups do you want to be involved with?
- Please list a three possible dates/times for touring the office and meeting staff.
- Please list two organizational programs/events that you will attend on behalf of the organization.
- I understand that attendance at the ten Board meetings is a requirement of my commitment and that I will provide advance notice, when possible, if I will not be able to attend. Additionally, I understand that in the event of two consecutive unexcused absences I will meet with the Board President and Executive Director to discuss my ongoing involvement on the Board.

The final question is about financial commitment and may be a bit uncomfortable for some organizations to discuss. However, it is essential. Total Board giving, even if it is \$100 for one person and \$10,000 for another, sends a powerful message to constituents and funders. It demonstrates the unified commitment of the Board to pursue the mission and sustain the organization. The amount of each individual contribution can be confidential. When talking about the Board's financial contribution discuss it in terms of a sum total and percentage of Board members giving.

Here is one way to state the question...

- We ask that you make a personally significant financial contribution to the organization. What amount are you pledging to commit this year and would you like to make it in one payment or over several payments?

Once completed, each commitment worksheet should be discussed between the individual Board member, Board President and Executive Director. All three should sign the bottom, with copies given to each. This



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demonstrates that the Board President and Executive Director work as a team and take this process seriously. It also reinforces that the Board member is accountable and committed to the organization's overall success.

At the end of the year the commitment worksheet should be reviewed by the Board President and Executive Director with each individual Board member to determine if the goals were accomplished, reasons why or why not, and what to modify for the coming year. Make sure to map commitments back to the strategic plan to ensure that your organization can reach its fullest potential.

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