

How to Best Use Volunteer Board Members' Education and Experience



Volunteer Boards (VBs) face unique challenges. They include:

1. They receive no compensation for their time or travel
2. They are asked to make (sometimes significant) financial contributions to the organization as a condition of membership
3. They may not have the right skills or experience, but are passionate about the mission and want to help
4. The quality of their contributions (except for their financial giving) is typically not assessed. There are no consequences for exceptionally good or bad performance
5. They are hard to fire!

How to Best Use Volunteer Board Members' Education and Experience

Each member of a volunteer Board brings unique qualifications to their membership. It's useful for the Chair to consider how to best employ these assets. There can be a real difference between what formal and informal education can bring to Board membership.

Formal Education: This is acquired from institutions of higher learning, often resulting in a certificate or degree. It implies a body of knowledge in the subjects studied. This knowledge can often be directly applied to Board issues or decision-making; so it's important the Board and especially the Chair know the formal education of each board member. The Chair should keep a record of who on the Board studied what, so they can quickly tap the relevant Board member.

Informal, "Street-Wise" Education: As valuable as formal education can be, sometimes "street wisdom" can be even more useful. Acquired through the entirety of a Board member's life experience, it consists of components like knowing what informal knowledge to apply in any given situation, and knowing what might or might not work. The better a Chairperson knows their members, the easier it is to know who on the Board to involve in any given situation. So it behooves the Chair to constantly work at knowing their members better.

Relevant Experiences: Before a candidate joins your Board, and throughout their service, the Chair (and other board members) should work to learn as much as possible about experiences the person has had that can be useful to their Board service. They might have been acquired from service on other boards, or organizations both similar to and different from yours. This experience is best learned in casual conversation around board topics, and just life in general. Certainly this requires an investment of time for conversation, and you never know when that investment will pay off; but be assured it will at some point pay off when solving a problem or taking advantage of an opportunity for the Board. The trick is for the Board Chair and members to know as much as they can about the experiences each of them brings to their Board service.

We hope this post is the catalyst for a larger conversation about this topic as well as other challenges facing Volunteer Boards. Please "comment" with your thoughts. Other articles in the series can be found on LinkedIn [#VolunteerBoards](#) or at www.larrysolow.com.

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