

November 1, 2019

When Members Become Board Members

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



1. They receive no stipend, nor 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!

Juan and Sally were asked by the Nominating Committee at their church to serve a two year term on the Board of Trustees. Each had been active for several years, participating in numerous committees and church events. Having read the job description, each felt they had the time to devote to the position and felt called to serve the church in this responsible position.

At the Annual Congregational Meeting, each was elected by secret ballot. In the reception that followed, Juan and Sally were mobbed by fellow congregants wishing them well and thanking them for serving. One of Juan's friends approached Juan and said, "I'm so glad you're joining the Board. Now we can finally move faster with implementing our diversity agenda." Someone who had joined the church about the same time as Sally, commented to her, "I really disagree with the Board's decision last Fall regarding the parking. Can you bring that back up? An existing Board member clapped Juan on the shoulder exclaiming, "I know I have your support in preaching fiscal responsibility." Another newly elected Board member who sang in the choir with Sally approached her, saying "If we leverage our choir network and vote together we can really advance the music community' agenda."

These scenarios are not uncommon. In fact, it is their knowledge of the church – its history, culture, and past and present issues – that were some of the biggest reasons they were nominated and elected. Similarly, as representatives of the larger congregation they are asked to serve, each has a large interpersonal network they have developed over the years.

These attributes can create tension with the objectives of the Board's fiduciary and other responsibilities to the church as a whole; as an entity rather than favoring the agendas of any one of its constituencies. In addition to that tension, Juan and Sally also need to navigate the dynamics associated with joining an existing team of Board members. Should they begin contributing right away? How strongly should they advocate for their own opinions and constituencies? Should they listen first to the existing members to get a sense about the team's culture and dynamics?

We suggest the following ideas to ameliorate these dynamics:

- Assign an experienced – and trained -- Board member (ideally the Board Chair or member of the Executive Committee) as a “buddy” for all new Board members
- Reinforce in the nominating and candidating process the perspective required of Board members
- During the candidate interview process, discuss these scenarios and ask how the potential Board member would deal with them
- Have the Board's initial meeting take place as quickly as possible after the new members have been elected. This enables the new team to begin its “Form/Storm/Norm/Perform” process as quickly as possible
- At the conclusion of the Annual Meeting, or shortly thereafter, the Minister or the Board President should acknowledge the change in roles of newly elected Board members during a church service. They should charge the congregation to be sensitive, both individually and collectively, to their needs as they transition from one role to another.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive; rather to stimulate your ideas about how best to support new and existing Board members, as well as the congregation at large, during this time of transition.

Written by Larry Solow

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.