

Great Nonprofit Board Members: Their Qualities and Habits

What are the most important characteristics to look for in a board member? Is it social connections? Personal wealth? Expertise in a certain area? Of course, all these traits are nice to have, but they aren't the most important. A board member with the right "intangibles" can take your organization much further than a well-connected, knowledgeable director who lacks the traits we discuss here.

Let's take a closer look at who makes the best board members and how to encourage and support these individuals in your important work. Feel free to skip to the sections below, or read the whole article for a comprehensive look at great board members.

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- [How to Encourage Good Nonprofit Board Members](#)
- [Support your good board members and encourage them to do more with Boardable.](#)
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What are the qualities of a good nonprofit board member?

The most important characteristics of a nonprofit board member extend far beyond work experience and education. While these factors are certainly important, less tangible aspects of a prospective board member might be more valuable to your organization.

The qualities of a good nonprofit board member include a passion for the cause, enthusiasm and excitement for helping in a variety of ways, combined with concrete preparation and action.

PASSION FOR THE CAUSE

Professionals in your community want to join your board for a number of reasons. Some do it for career advancement. Volunteering your time with a nonprofit at a board level is a wonderful legacy. Others want to give back to the community. Some have a strong connection or passion for the work being done by your nonprofit.

Finding enthusiastic and passionate board members helps you create a focused board that is willing to go the extra mile. You can rely most on board members who truly believe in your mission and have a passion for your cause. Other skills are learned, but a true love of feeding the hungry, rescuing pets or sharing the arts must be innate.

EAGERNESS TO PARTICIPATE

An important nonprofit board member characteristic is enthusiastic support of your cause in addition to the time and inclination to participate. **Board members who are in an ideal state to contribute serve you best.**

Those who can financially contribute, who can take time off for meetings and fundraising, and who are not overcommitted elsewhere will be most able to participate at the level you need.

Often, nonprofits think they should prize high net worth board members. However, someone with time to help and a willingness to jump in is often much more valuable in the long term.

PREPAREDNESS FOR EVENTS

As important as passion and enthusiasm are, ideally a board member will also be prepared for all board member occasions. The most prominent of these is [board meeting preparation](#). A director who shows up to meetings with a thorough understanding of the [agenda](#), board documents, and committee reports, with questions prepared and research completed is a HUGE asset to a board.

In addition to meeting preparation, a great nonprofit board member will also be prepared for more casual events. Simply reviewing their contact list to think about who he or she could invite to an

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outreach event or offering a space for a committee meeting can take board membership to the next level. Preparedness can be simple, but powerful.

EXCITEMENT FOR COMMITTEES

Speaking of committees, good board members know they are important to board progress and constantly look for ways they can contribute. If you have a board member who is conspicuously silent when it's time to fill a committee seat that he or she is well qualified for, that could be a sign their heart is not in board service.

Superior board members will see areas where they can add value and be excited to help make progress in [a committee's work](#). Hopefully, you will see board members adopt the progress of a committee they are on as a project they are deeply invested in. They may even choose to serve on the committee after their board term is up!

EXPRESSION OF THEIR IDEAS

Answering questions and providing information is a crucial role of nonprofit board members. However, the most engaged board members will come to the table with new ideas and solutions for challenges. Of course, not every board member will be the kind of person who can sway a group of people to their big, new idea. And we shouldn't expect them to be. If your board has [a culture of collaboration and listening](#), though, even the most timid board member should feel comfortable pitching an idea that will help the mission of the team.

Superior nonprofit board members will find a way to express ideas that further your goals, whether before a meeting [with the board chair](#), during committee work, or in the meeting itself.

CURIOSITY TO LEARN MORE

Board members are inherently successful at their regular jobs. Therefore, they are also almost always used to being in a leadership role. While this is an incredibly useful attribute for a board that needs to get things done, a willingness to listen and learn from others is also an asset.

When you cultivate members who have a learning mindset and are willing to listen to and explore new ideas, you open your brand up to more possibilities.

Your board members will also get more from the experience if they pick up some new experiences they can apply to other work. Sometimes, simple open-mindedness is the best nonprofit board member characteristic.

DESIRE FOR STEWARDSHIP AND SERVICE

Unfortunately, many of us have seen what we call a "LinkedIn board member." This is someone who wants to be able to list board service on a resume, but his or her heart isn't really invested in service and stewardship.

Great nonprofit board members put their own egos aside for the best interests of the nonprofit. That can be as simple as holding back an opinion in a meeting so that others can speak or as significant as volunteering extra hours to solve a critical problem.

We hope to find board members who not only do the right thing in the moment, but who actively look for ways to steward the nonprofit to success long after their board term is over. Once a board has established this expectation and culture of service, it becomes a self-perpetuating quality.

CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

Your board is likely stocked with educated professionals in similarly aligned fields. Unfortunately, a board created entirely of one type of professional may lack the creative skills to swiftly solve problems with a variety of "out of the box" ideas.

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A board member with creativity will bring fresh ideas to the table and offer additional skill sets. The addition of a single copywriter, graphic designer or videographer to your board means an influx of fresh possibilities for your brand.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

You may only meet with your board once a month, so it's essential to communicate well in all forms. This includes everything from staying in touch between meetings to fundraising and reaching out to others on your behalf.

Stocking your board with good communicators also ensures things don't get tied up because of interpersonal conflict or a lack of agreement. People who communicate well and have good resolution skills can usually get through a conflict swiftly and positively.

How to Encourage Good Nonprofit Board Members

Even the best board members need a good infrastructure and culture to continue their valuable contributions. If there are lots of barriers to overcome, poor organization, and complicated or overwhelming communication, burnout is almost a certainty.

Let's look at some of the best practices for making sure your best nonprofit board members feel inspired and supported for the long haul.

PROVIDE THEM WITH PREPARATORY MATERIAL.

If you have a great board member who is enthusiastic and active, you can supercharge that productivity by making sure he or she has everything needed to be effective ahead of time. This preparatory material isn't just about [board meeting agendas](#), but also for the role of board member itself.

In terms of board meeting preparation, experts recommend that board members receive all relevant documents and information at least a week ahead of time.

We wrote a comprehensive board meeting preparation guide that [your team can review here](#).

Additionally, you can set up good board member candidates for success by making sure they fully understand the board member role and expectations well ahead of time.

REWARD EXCEPTIONAL BEHAVIOR.

Doing great work for a nonprofit is its own reward, but that doesn't mean there aren't things we could be doing to help inspire board members and keep them motivated to keep doing their work. After all, sometimes board service can be long-term foundational work that board members might not see the immediate results of. It never hurts to plan ways to reward exceptional behavior.

There are all kinds of ways to do this, and some of it may depend on the nature of your organization. Some boards will award annual recognition for board members that go above and beyond. Other board members may prefer a more private recognition, such as a simple thank-you note from someone who is impacted by their care and enthusiasm. Know your individual team members and research ways to reward exceptional service.

BUILD A MENTORSHIP PROGRAM.

How can you make sure you have a steady stream of great nonprofit board members? One way is to have your best directors mentor incoming ones! This may seem like common sense, but sometimes we forget our greatest training resource for new board members might be the ones we already have.

There are a lot of advantages to this practice. Take the following for instance:

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1. You will help new board members get acclimated faster and understand the nonprofit's culture more thoroughly if they have another director showing them the ropes.
2. The senior board member will feel appreciated and rewarded for their excellent service when they are asked to share their perspective with another director.
3. Your board will establish a culture of great board membership by perpetuating the most effective practices.

With a little effort, these practices can set your nonprofit up for success for years to come. What have you got to lose?

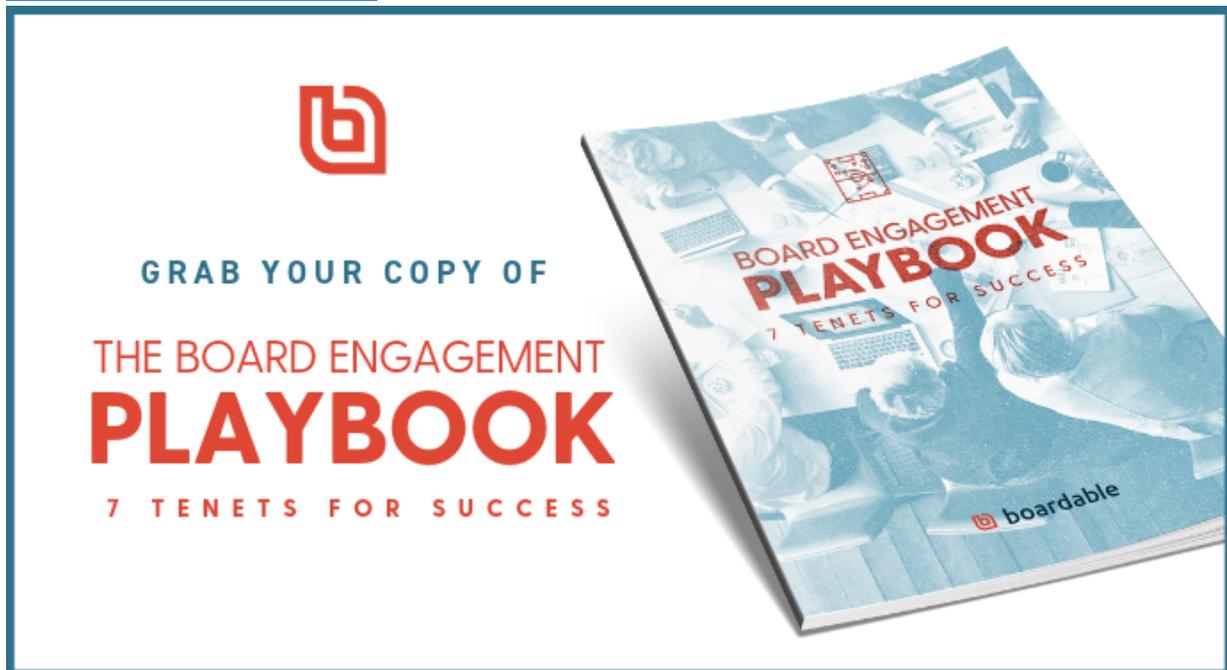
Conclusion & Free Resources

The processes and role requirements for being a good board member can often be taught. However, without some core characteristics such as passion for the cause, eagerness to participate, and the commitment to see the job through, even the most knowledgeable individual will be an average board member *at best*.

Hopefully, with the information in this article, not only will you be equipped to identify and recruit the best board members, but you'll also be able to support them in their work. Exceptional nonprofit board members who are empowered with information and tools can't be stopped!

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT WHAT MAKES BOARD ENGAGEMENT THRIVE?

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Banner, J. Author/CEO of Boardable 9/15/2020, <https://boardable.com/blog/nonprofit-board-members/>