

Including Young People on Non-profit Boards of Directors

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Despite a strong tradition of public support, newfound

criticism and public scrutiny have permeated the walls of non-profit organizations. A multitude of human services are now provided by private organizations, most of which are non-profits for which government funds have become the principal source of revenue. Stakeholders are interested in learning whether or not non-profits are indeed working to fulfill their mission in an efficient and equitable manner. Part of this scrutiny is directed at representation on non-profit boards of directors. non-profits must have a board of directors to satisfy the legal requirements of tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status. Without such status, the organization cannot provide donors with tax-deductible receipts or receive grants from private foundations and/or the government. Therefore, the board of directors is one of the organization's most valuable resources. With an abundance of non-profit organizations, it is difficult to attract and retain quality volunteers—especially for an extended commitment, as is the case with board membership. Tapping into previously underutilized groups, such as young people, may be the key for future organizational success. In turn, this also helps develop the leadership skills of motivated young people.

Serving on a non-profit board of directors involves honor, influence and, most of all, responsibility. Besides acting as ambassadors for the organization (and often key financial supporters) board members have the responsibility of envisioning the organization's future. Board members must work well alongside administrators, staff members and clients to achieve organizational goals. Non-profit board members have ultimate responsibility for the organization—including working toward the mission and vision and ensuring that the organization is operating in a financially sound manner. Despite their many responsibilities, the law prohibits non-profit board members from receiving compensation for their service. In addition, the law specifies that board members may be held personally liable if monies held out for government use (taxes and Social Security obligations) are used under their direction for other financial goals of the organization.

Some of the most prominent roles of non-profit board members include: advocate, committee member, financial supporter, monitor, reporter, policy maker, planner, coordinator and evaluator. Board members must act in an ethical and professional manner—including maintaining confidentiality of board meeting proceedings and making tough organizational policy decisions. Board members are expected to maintain personal objectivity and are not allowed to accept gifts or favors from individuals who do business with the organization. Because of these multiple responsibilities and the inherent complexities of the responsibilities, board membership has typically been delegated to trusted community business leaders—often a

homogenous group of individuals that typically excludes the young.

However, there are some compelling reasons to include young members on non-profit boards, including: new views and experiences, succession planning and special technical knowledge. It has been said that organizational decisions that are based on broad experiences and perspectives will be better decisions. Not only would non-profit organizations benefit from such an arrangement, but young people would as well. Material, social, developmental and ideological incentives may all play a part in a potential board member's motivation to serve. Examples of incentives for young people include improved leadership skills, recognition, social contacts and an opportunity to help make a difference in the community.

It should be noted that not all young people are suitable board candidates. While research has suggested that even the very young can contribute meaningfully to volunteer tasks, for inclusion on non-profit boards of directors, it is important that the young person be of high-school or college age to contribute to group decisions. Board members of any age must be committed to the organization's goals, as well as to learning and change. They should be team players who are willing to contribute to the overall well-being of the organization. Unfortunately, at high-school and college age, there are a variety of other priorities at stake: friends, family issues, school, extracurricular activities and part-time jobs.

Organizations must be judicious when selecting any board member—especially a new, inexperienced board member. Administrators and/or board members can accomplish this by making the interview session more formal and detailed. This too will help young people become accustomed to interviewing and job selection process. As part of the introduction stage, don't forget to give young people a chance to learn about your organization and for the organization to learn about them. When an organization decides to include young people on the board of directors, it may take time for staff members, administrators and even fellow board members to accept these nontraditional members. Provide the young person with a tour of the organization, including key contacts, historical lessons and explanations of common organizational jargon.

According to Josephine van Linden and Carl Fertman, providing leadership opportunities for young adults can help them answer the questions, "who am I?" and "how do I fit in?" Many organizations have already recognized this and have incorporated leadership development programs in their missions. One such organization, the March of Dimes, is actively involved in including high school and college students as leaders in the organization. This organization has named its youth leadership program, "Team Youth." According to the March of Dimes, Team Youth "is about the commitment, initiative and energy young people bring to the March of Dimes fight to save babies by developing leadership skills, setting goals, carrying out plans, raising funds (and) spreading awareness." The March of

Dimes offers training and mentoring for young adults interested in becoming a part of the March of Dimes mission. Team Youth members assist in strategic planning, lobbying and advocacy efforts as general volunteers as well as non-voting members of chapter boards of directors.

Inclusion of young people in the governance of an organization should be a structured learning experience for both the experienced board members and the students. Young board members should have clear responsibilities and an understanding of board policies and procedures. An appointed mentor may help clarify the young person's role in the organization as well as provide helpful feedback. Boards should remember to listen to young members' input and implement their ideas when possible to validate the young person's inclusion. Last, boards that seek to include young members should remember to be flexible to accommodate a busy schedule. Involvement in high-profile events, community recognition and letters of recommendation can boost the value of the young person's service to the organization.

As noted, young board members can be a great asset, but at the same time, there may be costs associated with nontraditional membership. When considering financial matters, minors may not be able to contribute financially to the organization

and cannot be held financially liable for poor fiscal decisions. They may not have the experience necessary to make tough policy decisions. In addition, it may be difficult to sustain their contributions due to competing outside factors.

By inviting the input of nontraditional board members, organizations show the world that they value differing views and opinions. In doing so, they open the doors for new ideas and change. Many young people are very eager to learn and are looking for a way to meaningfully contribute to their community. The first challenge for nonprofits, however, may be to break out of the mold of choosing the same cast year after year for the production known as the "Board of Directors." By including young people on the board of directors, non-profits risk losing some potential funds and more experienced voices. However, they can benefit from the new experiences and fresh enthusiasm that young board members bring to the table, as well as the potential for developing a group of individuals who will be interested in preserving the organization's goals for years to come.

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