How Do I Find New Leaders?

By Bob Harris, CAE

The most common question asked by executive directors is, "How do I find new leaders?"

Whether seeking directors for the board, volunteers for committees, or industry leaders to serve on allied boards, the critical step is to ASK. Nearly every volunteer remembers who flattered them with the question, "Would you accept a leadership role in our organization?"

Consider these approaches to building a corps of future leaders. The time and expense is minimal while the message conveys the opportunities for giving back and personal growth.

Every other year, plan a half day "leadership summit" for prospective volunteers. Start in the morning with time to chat over coffee, and then invite speakers to describe the importance of volunteering.

Promote opportunities on allied boards and councils as well as in the host organization.

Subjects to cover:
- Reasons and opportunities to be a leader in your profession, community and the organization.
- How to be an effective volunteer — skillsets and respected principles.
- Understanding governing documents, finances, strategic plan, etc.
• Risk management, including volunteer immunity, insurance, conflicts, antitrust and authority.
• Personal growth and balance as a volunteer.
• Questions and answers.
• End with casual lunch conversations gauging the interest of volunteers.

Other ideas for attracting new leaders include:

**Leadership Academy** — Academy is a leadership-training course over several days or months. The results are graduates eager to apply what they’ve learned. The Maryland State Bar Association describes their academy in detail on their website at www.msba.org.

The American School of Health Association offers Future Leaders Academy. Class size is limited to just four or five per year and applicants must be approved. A two-year commitment is expected, said Susan Wooley, Executive Director.

If developing a leadership academy isn’t practical (because of a small number of potential leaders or limited resources), check for organizations already offering leadership classes (chamber, college, and associations). Collaborate with existing programs and fund member scholarships to enroll.

**Shorten the Leadership Ladder** — Not every volunteer wants to give three to nine years to ascend a leadership ladder. Shorten the path. Find positions without the prerequisites of committee service, officer positions, and chairman of the annual convention, for instance. Amend the bylaws to fast-track leadership.

**Transparency** — Nobody wants to join a board that appears secretive. Adopt the principle of transparency in the organization. It is characterized by open meetings, access to information, collaborative efforts and respect for new ideas and people.

**Leadership Orientation** — Board members who receive no orientation will sit quietly for many meetings until they feel that they understand governance expectations. A good leadership orientation increases confidence and understanding of volunteers. Design an orientation program that benefits volunteers on your board as well as the other organizations on which they serve.

**Celebrate Leadership** — Those who contribute time to the organization deserve recognition. Do you promote the prestige associated with leadership? From photos on the website (“Meet the Leadership Team”) to a printed brochure introducing stakeholders to the leaders, The United States Tennis Association publishes “TeamWork – One Team. One Goal,” to highlight the leaders and staff in a pictorial directory.

**Board Manual** — Give leaders the documents they need to govern. From bylaws and articles of incorporation, to the strategic plan and budget — volunteers are handicapped without the information. Some organizations format the board manual in a notebook, on a thumb-drive, as a CD-ROM or maintain it on password protected website as a virtual manual. Be sure to include written job descriptions for officers and board so they don’t have to learn by trial and error (board job descriptions are available at www.nonprofitcenter.com.)

**Leadership Development Committee** — A nominating committee traditionally focuses on current year potential leaders. Organizations are expanding the role of the committee to a broader Leadership Development Committee. Duties include identifying the slate of candidates, facilitating a board evaluation process, participating in orientation and updating the board manual.

**Young Leaders Forum** — Young leaders often have more time and energy. They are eager to test their skills. Organize a group of motivated young professionals. Many organizations find the young professionals to be a self-governed council or committee that is willing to undertake fund-raising and special projects. Dennis Yocom, Executive Vice President at the Professional Insurance Agents of Virginia and DC, focuses on drawing young leaders to the board.

**Position the Call** — In many cases it’s all about how you ask for volunteers. The Special Libraries Association (SLA.org) posts “Why Seek a Leadership Position?” If the call for volunteers looks the same every year, then you might get the same minimal response.

Helen “HD” Dimsdale, Senior Director, Public Affairs at the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, sends out a message for volunteers, advising them of how leadership opportunities can supplement their career and benefit their resumes, especially in the current economy. For anyone without a job, the volunteer experience may be a stepping stone towards employment.

In closing, to quote Peter Drucker, “Leaders grow — they are not made.” The process to develop leaders should be a continuous effort of board and staff (most organizations include it in their strategic plan.) Mix and match these strategies to improve the flow of new leaders in your organization.

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