

Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee for the Board

Jan Masaoka
May 9, 2009

Use this method to recruit 3 - 5 new board members in the next 6 months: "Who do we know?" When board nominations comes up on the meeting agenda, this plaintive question is usually not far behind. While some boards have highly detailed matrices of recruiting priorities and others just have a sense of wanting someone "good," everyone tends to default to thinking of people that they know.

But how do we recruit people we don't know?

This question is especially important in nonprofits where new board members are needed to lead change, such as the following:

- A bicycle coalition that needs board members with clout in City Hall
- Board members of modest means who want to recruit some "heavy hitter" donors to increase the scholarship fund
- A mostly white board that wants to recruit some Latino community leaders to help shape strategy for an increasingly Latino community
- A board of baby boomers who want to find next-generation leaders to take the helm of the community arts center

Here's how the Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee works:

1. Identify potential committee members.

Develop a list of about 25 people that you would like to have on the board but who would probably say no. Perhaps they're too busy, or too important, or just not that interested. They like your organization, but they're not committed to it.

2. Invite them to participate on the Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee.

Phone them to ask them to be on a Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee for your organization. This committee will meet only once -- for one and a half hours -- and then disband. (That's pretty easy to say yes to and most people will say yes.)

Let them know that at the meeting they'll get a nice lunch, a 15-minute update on the organization's Critical Path, and they'll be asked to suggest a few people who could help on the most crucial, strategic work facing the organization right now.

Follow up the phone call with an email and then another reminder the day before the meeting.

3. Be clear on what you need board members to do.

At the meeting you'll probably have about 10 Blue Ribbon members along with some current board members. The board chair should welcome the group, and there should be a very short (15 minutes max)

presentation by either the board chair or the executive director on what the organization's critical path is. Do not take this opportunity to tell your usual statistics, program lists, and so forth. Treat this group of people like insiders and let them know the main issues in front of your organization right now.

For example, if your organization's critical path this year is to forge a partnership with leading Latino nonprofits, ask them to nominate people who can help you do that.

If your critical path is to find a new chair for the annual fundraising luncheon, ask the Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee to suggest people to you.

Important: focusing your requests around what people can and will *do* (helping you forge partnerships with Latino nonprofits) -- rather than what they *are* (such as Latino) -- makes the crucial difference in sparking creative nominations.



Other examples of critical path work for which new board members need to be recruited:

- Working with staff to develop a "Plan B" for the budget
- Introducing staff to the right people in county government
- Starting a major donor program with a first-year goal of \$10,000
- Recruiting and leading an advisory committee for the new elder abuse program

4. Sift through the nominations and select the first to call.

By the end of the meeting you should have 30 - 50 new names of people. And more importantly, these are people who have been suggested because they can move your organization forward on its critical path, not just because they're good people with skills and connections.

Let's say that Sally has suggested Emily as a possible luncheon chair, and Raul as a possible connector to Latino nonprofits. Your next step is to contact Emily and Raul.

5. Call

Here's how this works with Emily: "Emily, I'm calling because Sally Carlson suggested you for our board of directors. She did this because she knows your amazing track record at running luncheons and because she thought you would like working with our organization. Would you be willing to have coffee with me and our executive director to discuss this a little more?"

Focus on what candidates will *do*, rather than what they *are*.

Emily will take your call and request seriously because you've mentioned Sally to her, and she'll talk with you for a few minutes in a positive frame of mind (she'll also be flattered). Even if you don't get the coffee set up, or Emily doesn't end up joining the board, you will have made a new friend and Emily and Sally will talk about your organization the next time they see each other.

If Emily DOES join the board, she will have had a chance to understand what her role on the board is expected to be. And in sharp contrast to the usual situation where new board members are unsure what to do for several months, Emily will want to get started on the luncheon at her very first board meeting. The same is true with Raul if he joins the board; at

his first board meeting he'll ask, "Who should I meet with to start talking about partnerships for us to pursue?"

In short:

- Recruit a Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee. It only meets once. Good choices might include your foundation program officer, a city agency official, a board chair of a partner organization, a church leader, a fundraising consultant, or a well-connected nonprofit executive director.
- Ask the group for 3 - 5 nominations each based on how the prospective new board members will help the organization move forward on its critical path. (Do NOT ask them for everything you might want to do. Be sure to focus on what people will DO, not for what they ARE.)
- Approach the new nominees with the name of their nominator in your hand. It will make all the difference. Be specific about what you are asking them to do as a board member.
- Welcome the new board members, and let them get started on their projects right away.

At the end of this article you can download a sample form to use with your Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee. See also in *Blue Avocado*:

- [Critical Path for the Board](#)
- [Recruiting for Diversity: Part 3 in the Diversity Series](#)
- [A Board Member "Contract"](#)
- [Boards of All-Volunteer Organizations](#)



Blue Avocado is a practical, provocative and fun online magazine for people in community nonprofits. Subscribe free by sending an email to editor@blueavocado.org or at www.blueavocado.org.