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# Questions to Ask Prospective Board Members

## Questions to Ask Prospective Board Members

[Board Cafe](#) <sup>[1]</sup> • By Jan Masaoka • December 5, 2011 • [Email](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [Print](#) <sup>[3]</sup>



*A coffee date isn't a good idea only for beginning, tentative romances. A coffee or lunch date is an easy way to meet with individuals who may be good candidates for your nonprofit board. If you spend a few minutes ahead of time thinking about what to ask, you'll end up having a much better idea of whether it's a good match.*

Frequently a first meeting with a prospective board member is set up as a lunch or coffee with a current board member and the executive director. It's a good idea to state clearly at the beginning that this is a "get-to-know-you" meeting and that no decisions need to be made before the meeting ends. Say that you'll follow up with a phone call to see if the individual is still interested and whether the board's nominating committee is still interested. If so, there may be another step or the nomination may go to the full board for a vote.

An alternative process is

to have profiles of several candidates brought to the board. Board members sort the list into three groups:

A: Nominees that are well known to several board members and as a result, can be added immediately to the board by the nominating committee if the initial meeting goes well.

B: Nominees with whom to explore board service. If the initial meeting leads to signs of mutual interest, the nominating committee can choose to explore further or to bring the nomination to the full board for approval

C: Nominees who don't seem to be the right fit, but depending on who accepts and declines from lists A and B, may be moved up to List B.

### Questions to ask prospective board members

The most important area to explore is specific to what your organization is seeking someone to *do* (rather than seeking what someone *is*):

- One of the reasons we're talking to you about possibly joining our board is because we think

you can help us connect with other public school parents in the African American community. Are these connections you could help us make? (Don't assume, for instance, that a gay person can connect your organization to the gay community.)

Other questions can help spark conversations:

- What interests you about our organization? Which aspect of our organization interests you most?
- What are some of your previous volunteer experiences or leadership roles?
- What appeals to you about board service as a volunteer activity?
- If you were to join our board, are there any experiences you'd like to have as a board member or people you'd like to meet?
- What skills, connections, resources, and expertise  yes  
do have to offer and are willing to use on behalf of  no  
this organization?  maybe
- Do you have any worries about joining the board?
- Is there anything you think you would need from this organization to make this experience a successful one for you?



If fundraising is an important activity for board members, be sure to raise it now:

- We're hoping that if you join our board, you'll be a member of the fundraising committee. In fact, we hope that you will be able to ask five or ten of your friends for contributions of over \$1,000 each. Is this something you think you could do?

**Questions you should be prepared to answer, if the candidate asks:**

- Why are you interested in me as a board member?
- What role do you see me playing on your board?
- What are your expectations and commitments?
- What is unique about your organization?
- What do you feel is unique about your board?
- Are there particular discussions this board has difficulty handling?
- What weaknesses are there in the way the board works together and with staff?
- What are the major issues this board is facing? How are you addressing them now?
- If I were to join this board, what would you want me to do during my first year?
- If I were to join this board, what could I reasonably expect to get out of the experience?

At the end of the get-acquainted meeting, you might want to suggest that each side think about the candidate's joining the board. Let the nominee know you'll be in touch within a week once you've had a chance to talk over the "fit" with others on the board. Encourage the candidate to think it over, call or e-mail you with any questions, and let you know within a week if he or she wants to take the next steps to joining the board.

*Caution:* An easy mistake to make is to allow someone who is "not quite right" to join the board. Maybe he doesn't bring sufficient clout or expertise to the table, or maybe she seems like too short-tempered a person. It's hard to say no especially if the nominee is a friend of a current board

member. Keep in mind that the five horrible minutes of saying no now is not as bad as three horrible years of a not-up-to-par board member.

See also in *Blue Avocado*:

- [A Different Approach to Board Terms](#) [4]
- [A Board Member "Contract"](#) [5]
- [Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee for Your Board](#) [6]
- [A Fresh Look at Diversity and Boards](#) [7]

This article is adapted from a chapter in *Best of the Board Cafe*, which compiles dozens of articles from *Blue Avocado* about and for nonprofit boards. Available [here](#) [8].

**Jan Masaoka** is editor of *Blue Avocado*, and writes the *Board Cafe* column each issue.

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