Different Overall Approaches to Staff a Nonprofit Board

One of the most important aspects of Board operations is Board staffing. Just like the careful staffing that is usually done with employees, Board members should be carefully selected, trained and evaluated, as well. Board members and other leaders must appreciate the strong value that Board members can bring, rather than tolerating Boards as if they are some necessary evil to be avoided at all costs. Leaders should not approach recruitment and selection as if they are somehow lucky just to get Board members who will show up at Board meetings. Leaders must act as if they deserve a very dedicated and participative Board – that attitude alone can make a huge difference in achieving highly effective Boards.

The philosophy for staffing the Board depends on the Board model that the nonprofit prefers. For example, a policy governing Board might prefer members who have strong Board experience. In a collective, the nonprofit also would prefer members who were comfortable working as equals with members of the staff. Nonprofits often use a mix of the following approaches.

- **Functional approach**
  Boards staffed primarily with members who have the skills and knowledge to address current strategic priorities, for example, Boards, planning, programs, staffing, finances and fundraising. This approach is useful when starting a nonprofit because Board members can help build the various management functions. It also is useful to ensure strong governance of the various management functions on an ongoing basis. The number of Board members that you might have depends on the types of skills that you need on your Board, which, in turn, depends on the range and complexity of issues or goals to be faced by the nonprofit.

- **Diversification approach**
  Boards staffed primarily with members that represent a variety of different cultures, values, opinions and perspectives. This approach is useful to ensure that Board planning, deliberations, decisions and policies truly consider many different perspectives and that they do not forget about, or discriminate against, certain groups of people. The number of Board members to have on your Board depends on the range of diversity that you want to involve.

- **Representative approach**
  Boards staffed primarily with members who represent the major constituents of the organization, for example, members from different regions or groups of clients. This approach is useful to ensure that specific constituents, for example, subchapters of a national organization, always have strong input to the Board's planning, deliberations, decisions and policies. The number of Board members to have on your Board depends on the number of different constituents that you want represented.

- **Passion approach**
  Boards staffed primarily with people who have a strong passion for the mission of the organization. Too often, that approach only makes for passionate meetings, not for passionate results. Passion alone is not enough – Board members also must have the time and energy to actively participate in the Board.

Often, nonprofits use a mix of these approaches, for example, the functional approach to ensure that governance has strong oversight of management activities, and diversification and representative approaches to ensure that all important perspectives and constituents are represented on the Board.

If you are using this guide to start a nonprofit (rather than to further develop or to repair your Board), then at this point in your use of this guide, you have probably already got at least three or four Board members who are helping you to start the organization. After conducting your basic strategic planning, you have got a better sense of what goals you need to achieve over the coming years and what resources and skills you need to achieve those goals. You very likely need more Board members to provide those resources and skills. For example, if you are struggling with finances, then seek a new Board member with strong financial skills.

Depending on the particular Board structure that members prefer (working, policy, collective, etc.), a Board Nominating Committee, Board Development Committee or Executive Committee might carry out the activities listed in this section of the guide.