

**THE HONEYMOON NEVER HAS TO END:
How to Keep Your Board Happy and Productive
By Carol E. Weisman**

You've been courted for months by an organization that wants you on its board.

Finally, you've said "yes."

Everyone's happy, expecting a long, contented life together.

Then reality sets in.

You walk into your first board meeting.

Everyone knows everybody - **except you.**

Even people who aren't shy know how uncomfortable it can feel to walk into a room of strangers. Yet many non-profits don't recognize that a key ingredient in building a dynamic, productive board is helping people feel comfortable.

The process of board-bonding is all-important, and it has to begin with a new board member's very first meeting. Here's some advice for the board president on building that bond:

1. Reinforce the Players' Names.

To feel comfortable, you first need to know the players' names. Much anxiety goes out the window if board members wear name tags at all meetings. If you sit at a table, you can each have a folded sheet of cardboard in front of you, bearing your name. These "plaques" are even easier to read than name tags.

Another way to reinforce people's names is with repeated introductions. It's useful to begin each meeting by introducing all board members by name, professional affiliation, and board function. When new people are coming to a meeting, designate someone to greet them at the door and introduce everyone.

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2. Have an Agenda.

The next aspect of comfort is knowing what is going to happen at the meeting. Every board member should receive an agenda a week before the meeting. An agenda keeps the meeting on track, establishes boundaries, and indicates who is responsible for specific reports.

3. Provide a Relaxed Environment.

To be productive, you must feel safe. If people are yelled at, ridiculed, or harassed for having differing opinions, they will not be comfortable or productive. The person running the meeting is responsible for keeping discussions from becoming volatile.

A "time out" is as effective in the board room as it is with children. Tabling a discussion

until another meeting or referring it to a committee are two ways to diffuse a difficult situation. Acknowledging the organization's needs and the importance of a decision can also help. Consider this approach: "We all know how desperately we need a new building for the children we serve, and we appreciate how much hinges on choosing a site. Because of the difficulty and importance of this decision, we need to give it more time."

Acknowledging the needs and concerns of board members and giving credit for work done can put them back on task. For instance: "We all appreciate Louise and Joe's time and dedication on this project, and how much they care about the children we serve. Let's give this a little more time."

4. Clarify Expectations.

Being clear about expectations and boundaries is another comfort builder. Before people join your board, be sure to let them know what you want from them. Tell them, for example, that all board members give an annual gift, that the average is \$250, but that you consider the amount a personal decision. This way, you give them permission not to adhere to the average, which may be out of their price range. Yet you have offered them valuable guidelines.

You need to present your expectations in different ways because people absorb information in different forms. One way is in the initial recruitment interview. You might say, "We require three things of board members: giving an annual gift, attending at least 50 percent of all board meetings, and being on at least one committee." Besides explaining these requirements verbally send a formal letter of

invitation to the board, listing expectations. Ask them to sign a form showing that they understand and accept these conditions of board membership.

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You should also make it clear that arm twisting is not allowed and that "no" is an acceptable answer. It helps to use phrases such as "Do you have time to...?" or "Would you be interested in...?" On the other hand, it is often useful to ask "Why?" when people say "no." Perhaps they're interested in a task but have never done it before and are afraid to try. You might ask, for example, "Is this something you really don't want to do, or would you be willing to try it with a co-chair or with staff support?"

5. Give Plenty of Thanks.

Gratitude and recognition should be an integral part of your culture. Acknowledging contributions of time and money helps people bond with your organization. Say thank you early, often, publicly, and creatively. Remember that a creative gift is vastly better than an expensive one.

Try starting each board meeting by thanking people for what they have done in the previous month. Praise them for donations of time as well as for raising money. A typical opening might go something like this: "We've had an incredibly productive month. Reba, thanks for addressing 3,000 envelopes single-handedly. You're amazing. Because of Marty's tenacity with McDonnell Douglas Corporation, we now have a \$5,000 grant for the pre-school." The meeting has begun on a positive note, and members have gotten ideas about how they can contribute.

Acknowledging progress is a good way to

keep committees on task and keep the board updated. For instance: "Steve is making progress with the Neighborhood Assistance Program credits. He has an appointment with the assistant to the governor and is headed for the capital next week. Keep up the good work, Steve."

6. Be Inclusive.

Make it a point to thank board members' spouses. Plan to include spouses in at least one event a year. Such inclusion helps assure that they will understand your organization's mission and be supportive of the time their spouses spend on board work.

Also be sure to thank board members' secretaries and other support staff. Consider sending small holiday gifts, such as flowers or mugs with your organization's name and logo.

7. Don't Let the Honeymoon End.

Unless you take good care of your board members, the work won't get done and you will not serve your constituents. Providing a comfortable, warm atmosphere produces board-bonding and helps board members be productive. Being kind, supportive, and caring is good business.

The honeymoon between an organization and its board member never has to end. Indeed, it should grow in strength and commitment, just as a good marriage does. And, like a good marriage, the relationship benefits from all the positive efforts put into it. Each anniversary year between an organization and a board member should be joyfully celebrated. And when the board member rotates off, it should be as a friend for life.

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