

Ditch Your Board Composition Matrix

by [Jan Masaoka](#) on June 11, 2012

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You know the board matrix: it has a list of skills and competencies that are “supposed” to be on the board, such as legal, marketing, HR, fundraising, finance. And typically there are also demographic qualities, such as gender, race, age. The board matrix then shows what boxes you presumably need to fill.

What’s wrong here is that these board composition matrices focus our attention on what people *are*, rather than on what the organization needs board members to *do*.

Three traps of the board composition matrix

Let’s look at the three failures of board matrix approaches:

1. The skills trap: By identifying skills such as “legal” or “finance,” we often end up with the wrong kind of legal or financial professional on the board. For example, when we say we need a lawyer, we may get a personal injury lawyer when the legal issues at our organization are about either employment or zoning.

If your organization needs help re-working a budget down to \$650,000, a CPA who is in accounts receivable at Wells Fargo may not be as valuable as a non-CPA owner of a small business or the finance director at another nonprofit.

Furthermore, the emphasis on skills often leaves out experience, knowledge and perspective . . . and implies that only professionals are qualified to be on boards.

Instead of focusing on skills: focus on actions needed. Look for “someone who can and will help us analyze the true costs of our hotline” rather than look for a CPA. And by focusing on actions, we also tie recruitment to the real-life needs of our organization at this point in time, rather than a generic list.

2. The demographic trap: Nearly all boards feel weighed down by demographic diversity imperatives. Whether it’s a mostly white board thinking, “we need someone who’s black,” or an all Asian board thinking, “we don’t have anyone from India,” too often we end up with someone who lets us check the demographic box but never becomes engaged.

Instead: focus on actions needed. Do we need someone who can reach the Arab grocers association to get their support for the plastic bag ban? Do we need someone who can help recruit Spanish speaking Big Brothers? Let’s look for those action attributes rather than simply for someone who is Arab or who is Latino.

3. The connections trap: Too often we recruit board members because they are wealthy and know other wealthy people, or because they work for a corporation that we hope will make a corporate grant to us. But we don’t feel comfortable bringing up the issue of major donations during the recruitment process. As a result, we recruit a wealthy woman, let’s say, and spend the next year beaming the invisible message at her: “Volunteer for the fundraising committee and write a big check.”

Just because a person makes \$25,000 donations to other organizations doesn’t mean she wants to make one to your organization. And just because she has wealthy friends doesn’t mean she is willing to ask them for donations.

Just because someone works at a corporation doesn't mean they can or are willing to seek out a corporate donation for your organization. (They may have used up their chips already, or may be on poor terms with the people in the corporate giving department.)

And we've all recruited someone because he "knows everyone," and yet he never seems to get around to introducing us to anyone.

Instead: focus on actions needed. Rather than recruit someone "with connections to City Hall," ask a prospect if she would be willing and able to set up three or four lunches a year with city council members for your executive director and board president. Instead of recruiting someone because he's wealthy, ask him whether he would be willing to organize three other board members into a group that would try to raise \$50,000 per year as a group.

By focusing on what people will *do* rather than what people *are*, we accomplish three goals:

- We broaden our field of sight as we recruit for the board. Rather than just looking for someone in marketing, we think more widely and include bloggers, writers, community organizers, and others who know how to communicate a message.
- We don't end up recruiting someone with the right demographics or professional background or financial means but who can't or won't do what we have mistakenly assumed they could or would. When we recruit people for what they will *do*, we get people who can and do what is needed . . . because we've asked them if they can and will. And someone who has joined a board to help with getting zoning laws changed in your neighborhood is someone who will want to get started on that at his or her very first board meeting.
- We ground board recruitment in the needs of this organization at this time in its development, rather than on a generic set of skills or attributes out of a textbook. And by doing so, we focus our recruitment on the critical path of the organization and its strategic, pressing needs.

So throw out that board composition matrix. Instead: ask these questions:

- a) What are the three most important things for our board to accomplish this year?
- b) Do we have the right people on the board to make that happen?

See also in *Blue Avocado*:

- [Blue Ribbon Nominating Committee for the Board](#)
- [A Fresh Look at Diversity and Nonprofit Boards](#)
- [Critical Path for the Board](#)

Jan Masaoka is the publisher of *Blue Avocado*, and the CEO of the [California Association of Nonprofits](#). Her book on boards — Best of the [Board Cafe, Hands-On Solutions for Nonprofit Boards Second Edition](#) — is a practical compilation of short articles for nonprofit boards that unfortunately includes a board composition matrix that you should ignore. She wants to know why "Grumpy" or "Contrarian" never seem to be one of the desirable demographic characteristics on board composition matrices.