

Extreme Board Makeover (/content/extreme-board-makeover)

By Jan Masaoka [Board Café \(/category/topic/board-cafe\)](/category/topic/board-cafe)

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Despite the complaints of executive directors that their boards "need training," often the most effective way to change a board is to change the people who are on it. And sometimes, a board itself realizes it needs to change faster and more dramatically than it can by adding a couple of new folks a year.

"I shouldn't be on this board anymore," commented the board member of a large national organization. "My boss' boss should be on this board."

He was recognizing that the organization -- a national ethnic-specific nonprofit -- had grown in stature and clout and that it now needed board members with greater clout than the current board members. "My boss' boss can leverage more corporate money than I can. He has better political connections than I do. I love being on this board but let's face it: this organization has outgrown people like me."

Other board members reluctantly agreed. But they also realized that people of this higher clout would be reluctant to join the board as it stood now. Why would someone like "the boss' boss" join this board?

The executive director proposed this plan of action to the board:

- Board terms would be shortened for everyone by two years to accelerate attrition.
- She would work with the board officers to identify five candidates that she would approach as future board chairs, not just as board members.

The pitch to the potential change agents: "I'm not just asking you to be a board member. I'm asking you to be a leader of change. In six months you'll become the board chair. At that time we want you to bring on four or five people of your same caliber and clout to the board.

"The chair of this organization is in a position to provide national leadership to our community. This isn't an opportunity just to help our organization, but to step with us into that leadership role. Are you up for that?"

She started on the list, with the board's blessing. The fourth person asked said yes.

Take-home lessons

What both this executive director and her board realized was that a slow transition to a new board wasn't fast enough to keep step with the organization. And that the leaders they were looking for would not be content to join a low-level board for a couple of years before stepping into leadership. What's more, the leaders they wanted were people whose influence and reputation would enhance the *organization* (rather than the organization enhancing the reputation of the board members.)

Most importantly, the leaders they were seeking were people who had a vision for the community, not just for strengthening the work of this particular organization. Such a person would recognize that chairing this organization's board would be an opportunity for community leadership that couldn't be passed up.

And what if everyone on the board doesn't agree?

A CEO who is interested in an extreme board makeover must have partners on the board, particularly in leadership. She might point, for instance, to two specific examples of board candidates who were reluctant to join the board without several peers joining with them. Or he might talk over with the board chair a particular individual who is interested in joining the board, but only as chair.

If you are such a CEO, avoid saying that you think the board needs to have people of higher caliber. It's insulting to the current members. Instead, say that in order to raise more money, you need to have some board members with higher profiles and connections to open doors for you. And don't start by talking to the board; talk quietly to a few leaders on the board. They will have to make the argument to the others.

To make an extreme board makeover work, an organization needs a powerful and successful executive who can make a compelling case to potential leaders. And it needs board members who share a vision for a more powerful organization . . . and who are willing to put their own egos and desires aside to make that happen.

See also in *Blue Avocado*:

- Who is Responsible for the Board Doing a Good Job
(<http://blueavocado.org/content/who-responsible-board-doing-good-job>)?
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