

5 Steps to a Better Non-Profit Bike/Ped Organization Board

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1. Assess your strengths and needs. The Board of the 21st Century is a learning board. That is, it is a team that learns from its successes and mistakes. A learning board always looks to be more efficient and more effective. Start by listing Board strengths: What do you have going for you? Then ask yourselves what the perfect Board would look like?

By doing both of these things, you can develop a strategy to improve your Board without losing the good qualities you have. Board consultants now advise that there is no perfect model for a Board of Directors. You need to determine for yourselves what works best and how to make the most of your strengths.

2. Take recruitment seriously. A good Nominating Committee—perhaps better called a Governance Committee—will meet regularly to identify, cultivate, recruit, orient and education board members. Books and board development workshops offer a variety of Board Skill lists: things like marketing, media, fundraising, etc. Though this is useful it is only part of the picture. Always keep in mind that product is as important as process. While it is important to be representative of your constituency (geographic, gender, economic, cultural, other), it is also important to have a talented and effective group—a group that works together well. Take the time to really look at potential board members. Check references.

3. Create an orientation process. First impressions last a long time. Welcome new board members warmly. Give new Board members a complete picture: where the organization is today and where it wants to go. Also, provide basic instructions in how the board does its job and what is expected, and why. Consider a Board mentorship. That is, team up new Board members with longer standing Board members. This creates relationships and continuity of organizational culture.

4. Develop a meaningful committee and decision-making structure. Does your organization have standing committees? How many? Does your organization create ad hoc committees to deal with issues? Are committees open to people beyond the Board? How do committees make decisions and give input to the Board? Do you miss opportunities because it takes too long to make decisions? Is there consistency in your decision-making?

These things should be evaluated regularly. It would be nice if there were one model that works for every organization. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. Look to organizations that are doing good work. Find out how they

function. Try things. Evaluate what you try. Again, identify your strengths before you make changes in decision-making.

5. Emphasize teamwork and opportunity. People join boards for 3 reasons: 1) because they care about the issue, 2) to learn new things, and 3) to be part of a community. To attract and keep good board members, determine which one, or combination of the three, each individual is looking for. Make sure Board members feel like they are making a difference, have opportunities to expand their skills (budget for training for board members), and feel included and appreciated.

Teamwork is key. Look to create a board that isn't hobbled by inefficient or unproductive procedures or distracted by trivial issues that will have little impact on its ability to achieve the organization's vision. Personality is important—everyone must be a positive contributor. Don't fall under the misconception that you should keep a board member who undermines the enthusiasm and teamwork of the Board just because he or she has money, knowledge or connections.