



LEADer

A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among the leaders of NCGA co-ops

A Study Guide for Co-op Leaders The Joy of Board Recruitment: Recipes for Success



In This Issue

The Recipe, Never the Same Twice: My Path to Board Membership

—Cindy Owings [Page 3](#)

A Pinch of Interest, a Dash of Excellence: Finding Great Board Members—Marcia Shaw [Page 5](#)

Freshen It Up: An Awesome Board Candidate Packet

—Martha Whitman [Page 7](#)

A Stew's Long Simmer: Board Recruitment All Year Long

—Gail Graham [Page 9](#)



Study Guide

Nominating Committee Responsibilities Checklist

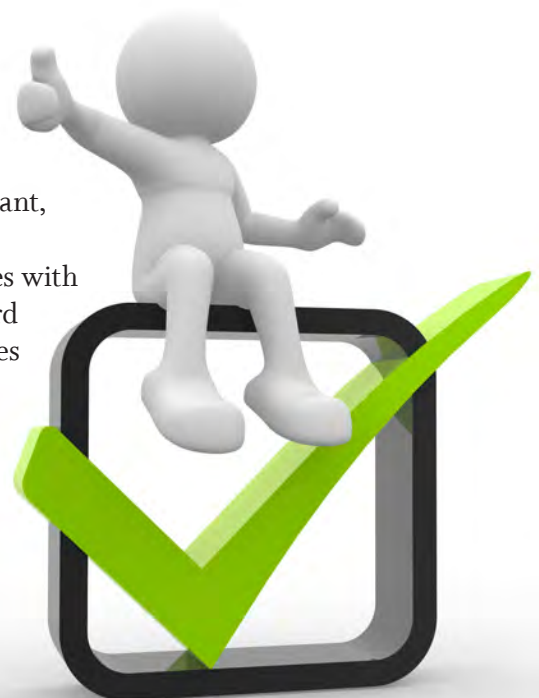
[SG 1](#)

Recruiting for Excellence

It's been said before, but it bears repeating: The most important work a co-op board member can do is to leave behind better board members. Recruiting enthusiastic, talented co-op members to serve on the board is a significant job. Ultimately, the responsibility for this recruitment is the board's.

How we fulfill this function says a lot about our commitment to co-op principles and to our democratic nature. Using a process that seeks out co-op members who have something to offer the board, considers the relative strengths and weaknesses of various candidates, and provides an opportunity for new directors to step into the role aware of what is ahead speaks volumes. It says: The board is important, and its work makes a difference.

In this issue, we offer four articles with suggestions on how to approach board recruitment. Our study guide provides a checklist and some suggested activities to help your board and nominating committee improve and streamline your recruitment process. We hope you find great ideas and refreshed energy for this important governance responsibility.



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More about the **LEADer**

A publication designed to promote visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among NCGA's Western Corridor co-op leadership

More about the LEADer

In 2013 the *LEADer* became a national program of NCGA. In its new capacity, it strives to bring in experiences and voices from among all co-ops affiliated with NCGA (as members or associate co-ops). To this end, we have expanded the BEST, and we welcome others who would like to join us in creating this quarterly study guide as a way to foster visionary and forward-thinking discussions between and among co-op leaders.

The *LEADer* is available to all interested co-op leaders. This issue and all back issues are available online at <http://www.cgin.coop/leader>. Those wishing to subscribe to the *LEADer* and have issues sent directly by e-mail as soon as they're available should contact Karen Zimelman at kz@ncga.coop.

We welcome your reactions, suggestions, and contributions, as well as questions for us to answer in future issues. Send comments or questions to askthebest@ncga.coop.

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The Recipe, Never the Same Twice

My Path to Board Membership

by Cindy Owings

In 1980 I joined the Community Food Co-op in Bozeman, Montana, because it offered real food and the joy of interaction with like-minded people. Always in the back of my heart sat the notion that someday, when what turned out to be my 23-year business career slowed down, I would have time to volunteer at the co-op. Growing up smack in the middle of the boomer generation, I was also imbued with values that centered on giving back—on contributing to a cause larger than myself. When the time came, I offered to become a working member. I took on the task of keeping track of board documents.

I will never forget walking into what I would consider a closet near the chill department in the back of the old store to meet the co-op's financial wizard, Dana Huschle. He handed me a stack of papers 10 inches high and wished me luck. With that first dip into the organizational deep end, I was terrified but energized. I had to more or less invent a system of keeping track of documents important to the efficient and effective functioning of the board. Calling on past professional skills, I eventually completed the assigned task, which gave me great satisfaction. To make a three-year story short, when a longtime board member passed away, I was invited to be on the board. That particular story lasted for more than 10 years.

Continued on Page 4

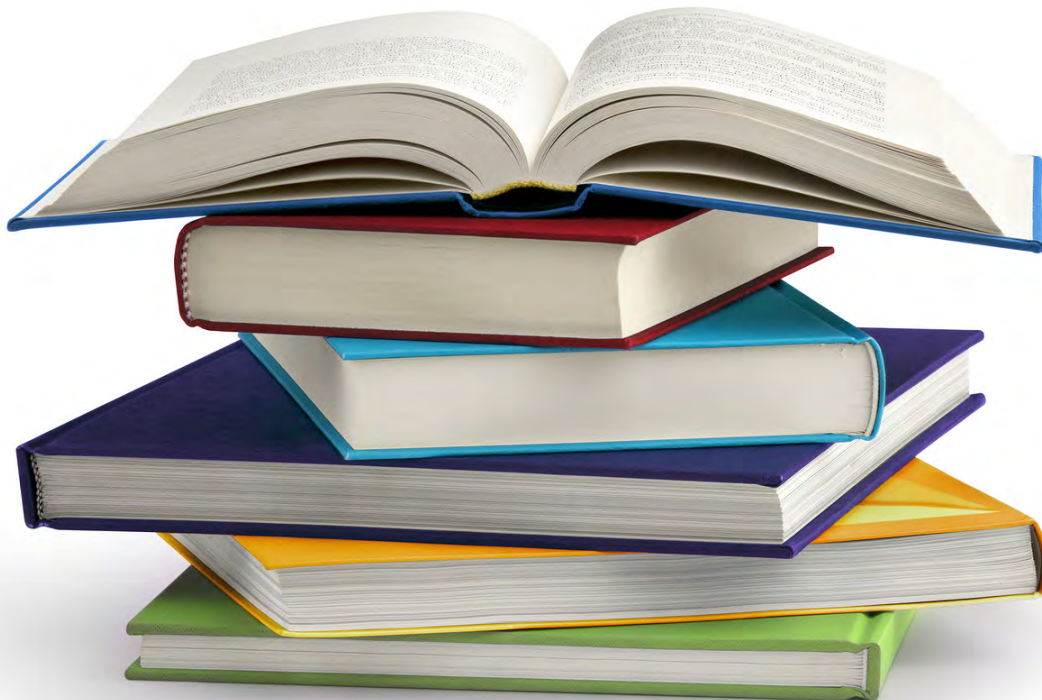
The Recipe, Never the Same Twice My Path to Board Membership

Continued from Page 3

Suffice it to say, there usually isn't a block-long queue of passionate, available co-op members who choose to take on the responsibilities associated with governing a cooperative business. Board member recruitment is no easy task. Seeking potential candidates for board membership calls for creativity and tenacity on the part of current board members, plus a handful of serendipity. Here are a few suggestions:

- Consider what personal qualities could bring new horizons to your board. Think about attributes such as intention, passion, skills, availability, and the ability to listen and hear.
- Look inward. Examine current board members' reasons for joining your board. Ask each member to tell his or her story. Create recruitment strategies based on what you learn from those reasons and stories.
- Look back at past board recruitment efforts. What worked and what didn't? Why?
- Be proactive with one-on-one outreach to potential board members. Mentor friends or acquaintances who might be good candidates.

Think about it: a 10-inch stack of papers led to my 13-year involvement with a co-op board. Similar "calculated serendipities" can bring new leaders to your board.





A Pinch of Interest, a Dash of Excellence

Finding Great Board Members

by Marcia Shaw

Although many boards formally charge a nominating committee with finding new board members, the board itself knows most about what is currently needed on the board. Does your board need particular skills or training? Do you continue to end up with board members who want to talk about store issues and are frustrated that the board doesn't deal with operational issues?

Even though you can talk to the nominating committee about what skills you need on the board, directors themselves often have an intuitive feel for people who might make good board members. So even if you have delegated the responsibility, you should still play a role in the recruitment process.

Finding good board candidates is a year-round process. It can rarely be accomplished with one conversation. You can interest potential candidates by talking up your board work and focusing on what's been interesting and challenging about your past experiences. You can describe upcoming board projects and ask if potential candidates find these projects engaging. A good "elevator speech" can spark potential board members' interest without a long conversation.

Sometimes boards specifically want members from a particular ethnic or age group, or those with specific skills. If you are looking for young parents to join the board, think about how to make your

Continued on Page 6



A Pinch of Interest, a Dash of Excellence

Finding Great Board Members *Continued from Page 5*

meeting schedule more accommodating to parents. Offer to pay for babysitting. Have an in-depth conversation about what you're expecting a new member to contribute and craft recruitment materials to appeal to those who might be able to make that contribution.

You can also mine board committees for potential board members. Create a description of how board work differs from committee work (it's more abstract, deals with a bigger picture, and is more long range) to help a committee member decide whether the board is (or is not) right for her.

When you've found a person who might be interested in running for the board, help him or her make that decision. Provide a packet of background materials that will help interested members understand the job and how the board works (see next article). Invite potential board members out for coffee or lunch. Finally, enthusiastically welcome potential candidates to board meetings. Be open and helpful to them as they listen, translating jargon and filling in the blanks when necessary.

If you do a good job supplying information about the work you do as a board, you are more likely to find qualified candidates who will not experience unpleasant surprises as they plunge into the reality of being on the board.

Good luck!

Looking for Balance

New versus Continuing Directors

It's important to maintain a healthy tension between the stability and institutional memory of long-term board members and the fresh thinking and perspectives of new board members. Look at your board's balance. Do you have semi-permanent board members who need to move on? Do you have good board members who need to be encouraged to stay for a few more election cycles? An open conversation about balance might encourage people to stay a bit longer or to leave the board to make way for fresh energy.



Freshen It Up

An Awesome Board Candidate Packet

by Martha Whitman

Thank goodness for other co-ops. Without them, each of us would have to individually come up with brilliant ideas. And thank goodness for the Internet, because one day I was looking for one thing and instead found two impressive board candidate packets. One was from Wheatsville Co-op in Austin, Texas, and the other was from The Merc Community Market and Deli (co-op) in Lawrence, Kansas. The packets were welcoming, engaging, and informative. After asking permission, I pulled the elements I liked best and integrated them into our candidate packet.

All too often, the nominations and elections committee takes a backseat to other committees, such as finance and member engagement. That's understandable. Directors have much to pay attention to on a continual basis, and board elections occur only once a year. But as co-ops mature in an ever-increasing competitive marketplace, we must recruit the best possible candidates; we're past the days of taking any warm body. A comprehensive candidate packet can help attract good candidates. More than anything, we want potential directors to understand board work. We want them to be

Continued on Page 8



Freshen It Up

An Awesome Board Candidate Packet Continued from Page 7

clear on what they can expect and what we expect of them.

Your awesome candidate packet should begin with a welcome letter from the nominations and elections committee chair, extending appreciation for the candidate's interest, explaining candidate qualifications per the co-op's bylaws, and providing a schedule of important dates and contact information.

After that, provide details about your co-op and the board. We start by listing the cooperative principles. Most members aren't well informed about the cooperative model and can benefit from a short summary about co-ops. After the co-op principles, we have a Q&A section that provides a succinct overview of the board job: what the board does and doesn't do, the time commitment involved, compensation, and so on.

An explanation of co-op governance might not fall as easily into a Q&A format. We have a Policy Governance board, so we needed to explain the basic concept, since few people are familiar with it. We kept the explanation to one page—since while there's much to say about governance, only so much can be absorbed at any one time.

You might consider adding scenarios to bring the governance process home.

For instance, what is the proper board response when a member is unhappy with an operational decision made by your general manager? What should happen when a director keeps asking the general manager for detailed reports regarding operations? What does a director do when contacted by the media? Your scenarios can illustrate a typical issue, explain the appropriate board response, and reference it back to the governance process.

While developing the packet might take time, you'll save many people's time in the long run. Some potential candidates will eliminate themselves after reviewing the packet and learning that the job is not what they're looking for.

Ideally, candidates will attend a few board meetings before deciding to run, so they know what they are committing to (although I'm always surprised

at how few do so). If your bylaws don't restrict it, consider making such attendance a requirement for candidates. Equally important is for candidates to understand the board's code of conduct. Include it in the packet and make it clear that, if elected, the candidate must sign the code and agree to abide by it.

It's impossible to cover all the bases, but with a little work upfront, you can provide a clearer picture of what it takes to be an effective board member. Taking a fresh look at your candidate packet is a good step toward improving your pool of potential directors. To get your creative juices flowing, feel free to look at ours, posted in the CGN library. And if you have a board packet you're proud of, please post it there as well. Let's share our knowledge and build the boards our co-ops deserve.



A Stew's Long Simmer

Board Recruitment All Year Long

by Gail Graham



*We are always looking for
good candidates to put
before our membership,
and we want to have
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at the last minute.*

In 1977 I attended my first annual meeting at my new co-op and left as a member of the board. I gingerly raised my hand in response to the plea, “Come on. Won’t somebody run?” And thus started my illustrious journey as a co-op leader.

Sadly, my story was not all that unusual for our co-ops in their early years. Thank goodness those days are past. We know that a strong board plays a crucial role in the success of our cooperatives, and we know that we can’t leave building that board up to luck.

Ultimately it is the board’s job to perpetuate itself, and we have become increasingly sophisticated in our approach to board recruitment. Still, too often the nominations committee is viewed as an ad hoc committee that kicks into high gear about three months before an election. Committee members beat the bushes for candidates, manage the election, announce the winners, and exclaim, “Whew—that’s it for another year!” before going back into hibernation until the next cycle.

Continued on Page 10



A Stew's Long Simmer

Board Recruitment All Year Long

Continued from Page 9

Some co-ops are beginning to recognize that nominations and recruitment should be year-long, year-round processes. At my co-op, Mississippi Market, the recruitment process is clearly owned by the board—but a number of key players are involved. Our board delegates much of the work to the nominations and governance committee. Its job is to recommend strategies and to implement tactics to help create a highly functional board. Its responsibilities include developing an annual recruitment plan, keeping in mind the current board mix of skills and talent and the board's key development needs given

strategic priorities; developing a process for ongoing cultivation of potential candidates; and of course implementing and overseeing election processes.

As general manager, I regularly come into contact with members. I often reach out to people I think would make good candidates and put them in touch with the nominations committee. At some co-ops, this might not be considered appropriate, so it is important to have an explicit conversation about the GM's role to ensure clarity and to avoid misunderstandings.

We have always had staff support in getting packets to candidates, arranging details of the voting process, and carrying out related tasks, but this year we began providing more staff support for the nominations

committee itself. Our goal is to create a documented year-round system that we can replicate every year and tweak as needed. This is especially important because our board has a two-term limit, so director turnover is a given. We are always looking for good candidates to put before our membership, and we want to have a well-oiled process in place to ensure that we don't have to scramble at the last minute.

Ultimately the board still "owns" and is responsible for the recruitment process. However, as general manager I have a vested interest in supporting that work effectively. Not only is having an excellent board key to the success of a cooperative, but the board is also my boss—and I want the best boss I can have!

Recommendations for Co-op Nominating Committees

Your co-op's nominating committee should work year-round with the board to cultivate candidates who are well qualified, understand the board's role, and meet the specific needs of the board at that particular time. If allowed by your bylaws, the committee should have a process to screen candidates, allowing you to round out the board's collective skill set. The screening process should ideally include a written questionnaire and an in-person interview.

Member-owners should feel comfortable that candidates endorsed by the nominating committee are qualified to serve on the board. To ensure that all members have the opportunity to run for the board, however, an alternate path to nomination, such as a petition process, should be provided.



NOMINATING COMMITTEE RESPONSIBILITIES

A L E A D E R S T U D Y G U I D E



RESPONSIBILITIES CHECKLIST

Here are some activities and tasks that your board can do to improve your recruitment efforts.

1. Create a nominations and elections calendar for the coming year.

Clarify committee and staff responsibilities for various tasks. The tasks and steps should include:

- Debriefing from recent elections
- Taking inventory of current board members' skills
- Listing desired qualifications
- Preparing a candidate's packet
- Preparing a nominations and elections timeline
- Publicizing the need for candidates (internally and externally)
- Reaching out to potential candidates
- Reviewing applications and screening candidates
- Allowing candidates to attend a board meeting
- Allowing time for petition candidates to submit materials
- Finalizing candidates
- Preparing election materials
- Distributing voting materials
- Administering the voting process
- Orienting new directors

NOMINATING COMMITTEE RESPONSIBILITIES

A LEADer STUDY GUIDE

2. Ask board members to reflect on what surprised and excited them most when they first came on the board.

What did they wish they had been told before being elected? Use this information to refine the candidate's packet and board orientation materials.

3. Determine how many seats are up for election and whether current board members intend to stay on the board.

Brainstorm as a group about the ideal candidate. Identify potential candidates from your community. Think big! Who would you really *love* to see on the board in the next three to five years?

4. Create a candidate packet.

Be sure to include the board code of conduct, the board calendar, an overview of board responsibilities and the time commitment needed, an explanation of the governing system used, and information on committees and committee service.

5. Recruit potential candidates using newsletter articles, social media, posters, press releases, and other promotional materials.

Conduct short video interviews of board members about what they like about serving on the board, what the board does, and what serving on the board involves. Post excerpts on social media or the co-op's website.

