

# Four Reasons To Throw Away Your Old Board Recruitment Matrix

by/par Jane Garthson

I remember when we first started plotting board member skills and demographics in a table—we felt so organized. We could put check marks on a grid; plan our board recruitment to fill current and upcoming gaps, and document that plan. It was a big step forward over just brainstorming to get a list of people we knew, with no thought to what we really needed. And consultants like me started routinely recommending the board grid or matrix to governance clients.

That started about twenty years ago, and I see the same old formats and lists still being used. We have learned much since then, but these outdated matrixes have not been updated to match. Here are four key reasons the old matrix format is critically flawed.

## ***1. The matrix demographics encourage "representational" thinking.***

Here's how the thinking plays out. "Given our current composition, we need one member under 30, one member from Quebec, one director who is a visible minority and one (insert your custom specification here)."

There are three major problems with this thinking. One is that passion for your mission, and skills to govern, should always be considered; never recruit for demographics alone. You should be looking for people who have the passion, skills AND knowledge of some part of your community. Don't look at different parts of your matrix in isolation.

The second is thinking that any one person can "speak for" a whole community. No one can speak for all young people, all members from the prairies, or any other such group. These individuals often feel like, and are made to feel like, tokens. The retention level is poor for people who feel that way, and often their contributions are lessened while they are on the board.

The third problem, not unique to boards that use matrices, is that the individuals may feel they represent their demographic group. When that happens, they may vote in the best interest of one part of your community or membership and not in the best interests of the whole. They then fail to carry out their duty of care to your organization.

The problem is often made worse by having people elected by segments of your membership, such as provinces, and then failing to educate them on their true board role. Such election processes often also lead to boards of unwieldy size as more segments are added. I have yet to hear of any organization that retained this system of electing board members after a facilitated and independent governance review.

Bylaw changes, however, take time, and in the meantime you can readily communicate to both the directors and the communities that elect them that once on the board, they can bring knowledge of their community to the table so everyone can make informed votes. And they can be a communications link back the group that elected them or is

part of their demographic. But they must put the whole community and whole organization first.

**Sidebar:**

A national association that was a client of mine in governance in 2009 had one-half of the board seats reserved for a particular demographic, to match the fact that half of their programs served that demographic. They thought this would be important to the communities being served, but my consultations showed hardly anyone in those communities were even aware of the board composition.

These directors tended to speak only when the board agenda topic was about their community, and be much less involved in overall governance of the organization than the directors at large. Also, while they were legally part of the demographic in question, many were not living in the same areas as the programs were being delivered, and were poorly connected with those geographic communities.

Once those issues were disclosed to the board, there was unanimous consent to change the bylaws and focus more on skills and knowledge, and much less on demographics. That actually made the board more appealing to the most qualified candidates from that demographic, as they no longer saw themselves being asked to fill the quota specified in the bylaws. And the board had more ability to seek directors from another demographic that had been identified as greatly needed at that time.

They threw away their old matrix, and they are glad they did.

## ***2. The traditional matrix skills encourage operational thinking and meddling.***

There are dozens of accepted lists of roles and responsibilities of board members, and CSAE among others sells a monograph on the topic. The lists quite properly focus on governing the organization, such as hiring and managing the chief staff officer and carrying out fiduciary duties.

In twenty years of reviewing, and creating, such lists, I've never seen a reference to engineering, information technology, marketing, operations management or public relations as board responsibilities. But these operational areas and others like them appear on many board matrices under skills or knowledge. There are even organizations that will help recruit board members for nonprofits that foolishly list ONLY such operational skills. If you try to sign up as a candidate and indicate skills in an area like strategic planning or audit, there is no place to do so.

Once you tell candidates they are being considered because of their operational specialty, they quite naturally expect to use it in their board work. One of two things then happens. The board, operating well, avoids getting into operational details and areas for

which the chief staff officer is being held accountable—and the new board members are confused. Or the board has set up board committees in operational areas such as facilities management or newsletters, that often duplicate the work of staff and blur the lines of accountability.

Of course many Canadian associations are not large enough to have all the operational skills they need within the staff, or enough staff time to carry them out. Wise organizations know that the board cannot delegate board work, but both the board and the chief staff officer can find other volunteers to help with operational work, often on operational or program committees properly reporting to or through the chief staff officer. Board members can also volunteer for such committees, but only after making sure they have enough time for their board commitments.

Your matrix should list only the skills and knowledge directly relevant to board work. It can be very valuable to have someone with experience in hiring and evaluating senior leaders, and overseeing high level human resource policies, but a check mark against "human resources" won't help you know that kind of detail.

### ***3. The traditional matrix focusses on occupation not knowledge.***

In the next few years, most Canadian associations will be redoing their bylaws, due to new federal or provincial laws. Do you think it will help to have a lawyer who specializes in real estate and isn't even aware of the new legislation, let alone how to develop nonprofit bylaws? Or would you prefer directors who understand the legal framework applicable to your nonprofit, and maybe even have recent bylaws experience?

Remember that while lawyers make excellent board members because their education teaches them to ask good questions, others can ask good questions too. And the lawyer on your board is primarily a board member, not a lawyer, so solicitor-client privilege likely does not apply. You can't just recruit a lawyer to save legal fees.

Similarly, do you want someone with a current understanding of financial reporting methods, risk management and investment policies to head the audit committee? Not all accountants have that sort of expertise. A CFO, or someone who has chaired an audit committee before, may fill the bill better for you, so don't restrict your search to professional accountants.

In other words, specify the knowledge or skills you need, rather than the professional designation or occupational title.

### ***4. A two-dimensional matrix is not helpful for board education planning.***

Finally, it is just no longer appropriate to have yes/no answers in areas where all the board members need to have enough knowledge for informed decision-making. Yes, you want a few people with good financial backgrounds, but EVERY board member

needs to be able to understand the financial reports and statements. You need to find out what level directors rate themselves at for such comprehension. If eight out of ten members say they cannot read the financial statements at all, you need an in-house workshop for all directors, so the two that do understand can help the others (and perhaps fill in gaps of their own). If eight of ten can read the statements, you could schedule a coaching session for those two or send them to a local public workshop for nonprofit leaders.

Every board member needs to be a positive ambassador to the community, to participate in group decision-making, to comprehend reports to the board, and, now in many organizations, to be comfortable in electronic communications and virtual meetings. You do not need IT expertise from your board members, but you do need to know which directors need training to participate between meetings.

So learn from the hot trend in movies. Put on the 3D glasses and see skills and knowledge as a cube and continuum, not as yes/no. Have the training needs jump out at you! You can ask people to rate themselves. Have a scale from "I need training" to "I have expertise" with several points between.

For candidates, ensure they understand that low scores in certain areas will require a willingness to take training. And of course, you are able to more readily see which candidates come closest to having the skills and knowledge you need.

### ***Start Over***

The old matrices are so detrimental to your recruitment that I truly suggest you just throw them away. Rethink your needs from scratch, based as with all board work on the Vision, Values and Mission Statements, and the current strategic priorities in your plan.

I predict you will have a stronger pool of candidates, more satisfied directors, and more directors prepared to take an active role, become committee chairs or officers, and be your next leaders.