

HR Your Board!

- Lyn McDonnell CAE C. Dir.
President, The Accountability Group, Inc.

How consistently do we apply human resources thinking to our boards? A human resources process and philosophy -- if taken up by the nominating or governance committee -- can help ensure your board has the right people around the table to truly advance the organization.

Human resources is all about the optimal placement and deployment of people. While it is not appropriate for staff to decide who should serve on a board (that is the job of nominating committees and organizational members), it is good practice to encourage and enable the board and its committees to use good HR processes. HR professionals – should your organization employ such individuals - can support Board development by pointing board committees to resources and tools. They can do this while respecting appropriate *firewalls*, that is keeping out of matters and conversations they should not be part of.

Here is a checklist of how to start to HR your board:

- () Help the board or its nominating committee frame what a good board looks like. Do a board profile or matrix. This sets out the mix of diversity of perspectives and backgrounds that would constitute a “dream team” around the board table. The nominating committee can see the gaps and focus their search process.
- () Communicate basic requirements of the director role. In the call for nominations, provide basic information on responsibilities of board members so people learn expectations of the role in advance.
- () That generic profile checklist above, while a good idea, is not enough. Directors must have the expertise to ask the right questions to make a good organization better. Help the nominating committee develop a list of the top ten things they are looking for in new directors (for example strategic thinking, governance experience, knowledge of issues in the field, ability to express ideas, able to attend events as a representative of the board, etc.). Then suggest effective questions the committee can use to ask prospective directors about these matters. We need boards engaged and aligned with our vision and mission and too often we don't have vital conversations in advance.
- () As a matter of everyone in the organization being committed to continuous quality improvement and learning, encourage the board to evaluate itself regularly. If there is an appetite for this, offer to have the HR lead in your organization research and surface articles on the various methods of going about board evaluations.
- () Following up a board evaluation, help the board focus its learning. This may be through board development sessions or readings in specific areas. The HR function in an organization can bring some of these resources to light.

In my opinion, individuals with HR expertise are often under-utilized in supporting the governance function. A great board is developed over time very deliberately. Too often nominating committees flounder on their own. I say HR your board instead.