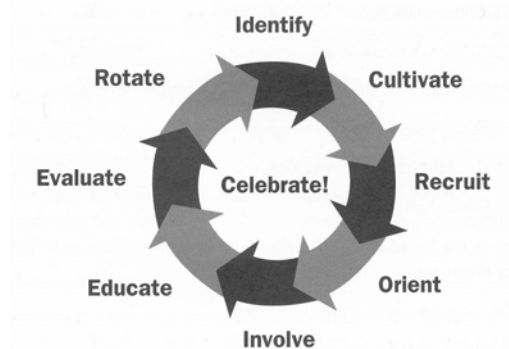


Building Sustainable Extension Advisory Councils: Steps to Recruiting and Engaging Members

ABSTRACT

By Ralph Prince

The Advisory Council Building Cycle



Step 1: Identify the needs of the board: the skills, knowledge, perspectives, connections, etc., needed to implement the strategic plan. What do you have? What is missing? Identify sources of board members with the desired characteristics.

Step 2: Cultivate potential board members. Ask current board members, senior staff, and others to suggest potential candidates. Find ways to connect with those candidates, get them interested in your organization, and keep them informed of your progress.

Step 3: Recruit prospects. Describe why a prospective member is wanted and needed. Explain expectations and responsibilities of board members, and don't minimize requirements. Invite questions, elicit their interest, and find out if they would be prepared to serve.

Step 4: Orient new board members both to the organization – explaining the history, programs, pressing issues, finances, facilities, bylaws, and organizational chart – and to the board – describing committees, board member responsibilities, and lists of board members and key staff members.

Step 5: Involve all board members. Discover their interests and availability. Involve them in committees or task forces. Assign them a board "buddy." Solicit feedback. Hold everyone accountable. Express appreciation for work well done.

Step 6: Educate the board. Provide information concerning your mission area. Promote exploration of issues facing the organization. Hold retreats and encourage board development activities by sending board members to seminars and workshops. Don't hide difficulties.

Step 7: Evaluate the board as a whole, as well as individual board members. Examine how the board and chief executive work as a team. Engage the board in assessing its own performance. Identify ways in which to improve. Encourage individual self-assessment.

Step 8: Rotate board members. Establish term limits. Do not automatically re-elect for an additional term; consider the board's needs and the board member's performance. Explore advisability of resigning with members who are not active. Develop new leadership.

Step 9: Celebrate! Recognize victories and progress, no matter how small. Appreciate individual contributions to the board, the organization, and the community. Make room for humor and a good laugh.

There are many models for volunteer administration.

The one used in this module is from BoardSource, formerly the National Center for Nonprofit Boards, seems to have application to developing advisory councils at the stage many of our counties find themselves. (*Principles* from other models may be just as appropriate and that model could be substituted if the presenter prefers.) Though the model mentions “board,” in this context it can be synonymous with advisory council.

Let’s begin with some principles for building a diverse group. These mindsets will guide to larger and more diverse advisory groups:

Avoid tokenism—People can tell if you are recruiting them to meet a quota or if you want real input from their perspective. No one wants to be the “only one” in a group, and no one person can represent an entire segment of the population. For this reason, two or three people from a community might be easier to recruit than one.

Inclusivity—You must believe that including others will widen perspectives and opinions and “this is a good thing.” In *Building Board Diversity*, Jennifer Rutledge suggests, “We need to work toward seeing the full range of abilities and expertise that will be needed from the group, not just the noticeable signs of difference.”

What do we need and what do we want? Many counties have used the membership grid from the Extension Advisory Council web site to evaluate where they are and what is needed to get to where they need to be. Use of membership committees on an on-going basis is vital to this success. Some advisory groups around the country are starting to refer to membership committees as “Council Development Committees” focusing on not just getting people but getting the right people and getting them trained.

Evaluate where do we start? Just where we are. Asking the above questions in a serious manner is a start to building a diverse group.

We would want advisory members to possess these characteristics.

- Ability to listen, analyze, think clearly and creatively, work well with individual people and groups.
- Willingness to prepare for council and committee meetings, ask the right questions, take responsibility and follow through, open doors in the community and evaluate oneself.
- Willingness to develop certain skills if they don’t already possess them, such as: securing resources; cultivating and recruiting other members or non-member volunteers and committee members; and programming development and implementation.
- Possess honesty; sensitivity to and tolerance of other views; a friendly, responsive, and patient approach; community building skills; personal integrity; a developed sense of values; concern for the group and its mission.

Where to find suggestions for members-- colleagues, other groups, media, staff, other members, volunteer and leadership groups, subordinate or collaborative groups

Whom to consider for membership--current or past clientele and collaborators, community leaders, representatives of clientele groups, corporate volunteers, people in professions related to your mission, people with needed traits, skills, interests, etc.

Where to look for prospective members--faith-based groups, professional and civic associations, organizations representing other groups

It is important to look at why people would join a committee to help properly select and channel individual efforts. In *Volunteer Management 101*, John Lipp lists the following motives people give for joining an advisory group: to help others; to give back to the community; to meet new people; to fill a personal void; because it is a tradition; to learn new skills; and the ability to influence others.

It can be important to keep these motivating factors in mind when helping committee members find their volunteer niche. Other reasons not mentioned by Lipp but added by some others are: pressure from peers; encouragement from the workplace; and desire for power and control. These three might be included in one of the bullets above but perhaps worthy of notation. The modules covered in the previous SEAL materials can appropriately train members with different motivations.

Council members want and need to feel a personal connection to the organization and its services, but it takes inspiration and perspiration to keep them active and engaged. As members realize the significant difference they make, they will become more involved. Throughout the past, Cooperative Extension agents have worked to develop and implement a plan of work with an emphasis to engage advisory members and keep them engaged. We must give members clearly defined tasks and work with them to develop the trust, relationship, and communications to stay involved. Meetings should be structured and officers trained in ways that every member can be easily involved.

Member involvement should be equally available to all members. As we work to “level” the field and make all members feel equally engaged and appreciated, we can get more people involved. Failure to engage new members early in their involvement may cause you to lose them or give them the impression there is really nothing for them to do. Experienced members need to be oriented as to their role in this involvement of new members. Mentoring of new members can help. As we seek to break the big picture down into smaller, more manageable tasks, we should involve people in meaningful tasks that wisely use their time and talents. Committee work is important in these areas.

There is a role for advisory leaders to fulfill at each stage of the program cycle. Every council member can be a part of the total program by being involved in a program committee. Program committees can be formed around individual objectives in the county plan of work. These committees can meet outside the council meetings and/or meet as small groups during a part of the CEC meetings each time they meet. Work can be done to plan, implement, evaluate, etc., the various educational activities within that plan of work objective. Agents and council officers plus committee chairs can give leadership to these groups. This will require efforts toward organizing, orienting and training facilitators, and empowering the groups. **However, involving advisory members in programming will have tremendous impacts—better programs, expanded audiences, leadership development, more advocacy, etc.** Sometimes non-members of the council can join a committee to make significant contributions.

Small groups are given a job to do and a report is to be given to the larger group. Care must be taken not to let the larger group redo the work of the smaller group. Recommendations or reports from committees or work groups are to be acted on by the council. If consensus can't be reached without totally re-doing the committee's work, then send the work back to the committee. If the committee was formed properly and functioned properly, in most cases their work will not have to be done over.

Education is the key to making good decisions, yet overlooked often in groups. Staff and officers have the responsibility to train and inform members. Councils should assess where members are in regard to having the information needed to make decisions. Staff members are to communicate the mission of the organization. Formal training, retreats, and electronic communications are means by which staff can educate members to achieve optimum performance. Councils may just use a time of reflection or they may use a more formal evaluation from time to time evaluate the group or individual role in their program tasks.

Early involvement with a group can be exciting, challenging, and productive. As time passes, a group without new members can easily become stagnant. This does not have to happen. You can keep a group fresh by: bringing on new people; shifting responsibilities within the council; moving people from standing committees to special ad hoc assignments; letting new people chair committees. When board members do a good job, they deserve proper recognition. This step should not be overlooked in the rush of getting business done. Creating a climate of appreciation and laughter helps create energy to deal with the challenges of the tasks ahead. Celebrate your successes together. Be sure members know your successes.