**Annex 7.2 More Information on Recruiting New Board Members**

## Recruiting: What Board Members Want

## Most people who serve as members of a think tank’s board do so for some combination of three reasons. First, they would like to enjoy the company of their fellow board members. This can be an especially powerful draw if the institution’s board is populated with prestigious individuals. Second, members want to feel that they are doing good work, that they are giving something back to their community through serving without compensation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Third, board members want to be associated with an organization doing high-quality work that may have significant positive effects on national living standards and governance. Highly regarded think tanks active in the public domain will have an easier job than others in attracting their most desired candidates.

Over time, boards can become more attractive to potential new members by helping the think tank achieve its primary objectives and by recruiting excellent new members for the board. Here, success breeds further success. Given the board’s central place in a think tank’s life and the intangible benefits board members seek from serving on the board, it is not surprising that boards typically devote substantial energy to recruiting new members.

Many candidate board members will want to be assured that the institute will purchase for them directors’ and officers’ liability insurance—in other words, insurance to cover the costs of defending themselves against allegations that they acted wrongfully in discharging their duties as a board member. (See article VII in the board bylaws presented in Annex 7.1 for specific language.) This insurance is payable to the directors and officers of an organization or to the organization itself, as indemnification (reimbursement) for losses or advancement of defense costs in the event an insured suffers such a loss as a result of a legal action brought for alleged wrongful acts in their capacity as directors and officers. Such coverage can extend to defense costs arising out of criminal and regulatory investigations/trials as well; in fact, often civil and criminal actions are brought against directors/officers simultaneously.

## How to Recruit

## Before approaching a candidate for board membership, the board needs to clearly define the minimum expectations for successful service on the board. How much time should it take? Does it just involve attending the board meetings, or is something also expected between meetings? The board member who knows the candidate best is usually asked to make the initial contact. Robinson (2001, 126–27) provides a good list of questions the board needs to answer before a member approaches a candidate.

What major issues is the board currently focused on?

What talents, expertise, qualities, or characteristics is the board seeking in new members?

How often does the board meet and for how long?

Is everyone asked to serve on a committee? How are committee assignments made?

What kind of fund-raising is required of board members?

What is the relationship between the board and the executive director and between the board and other staff?

Is an orientation program in place? Are other board education activities offered?

Does the board have an annual retreat of any kind?

Are there changes on the horizon that a new board member should know about?

Many recruitment conversations stress how little time will be required of the new board member. This is a mistake for two reasons. It may lead to unrealistic expectations on the part of the new member, possibly resulting in lower involvement than actually required. More important, it diminishes the real reason for which the person is being recruited: Their talent and experience would be valuable in helping to shape the institution’s work and future agenda. In short, apologizing for the inconvenience of serving usually backfires.

The tradition among think tanks has been *not* to expect board members to personally contribute funds to the organization. This was contrary to the practice of many service-providing NGOs. Many in the business or communications may not understand this distinction, and it is certainly worth pointing it out when approaching a candidate. At times the president may gently ask the chairman or a board member with a specific connection to a possible donor to make introductions or even participate in an initial meeting.

While this tradition still holds in many countries, in the west the last decade has witnessed an evolution toward members being contributors. This is particularly true in the U.S., where annual contributions are often expected from members in a position to make them. The board-as-revenue source is one explanation for the steady increase in the size of U.S. boards.

## New Member Orientation

## Orientation programs, formal or informal, make it easier for new board members to make a contribution right away. While private firms in many countries offer formal training programs for the directors of nonprofit organizations, these programs are likely ill-suited for most think tanks, for two reasons. First, most such programs are oriented to a wide range of service delivery nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), with which think tanks have little in common. Think tanks often more closely resemble for-profit consulting firms or university research centers than the typical NGO that provides human services (e.g., counseling, training, and various social services). Second, the kind of people recruited to think tank boards are unlikely to have the inclination or time to attend such training events.

A simple program organized by the chairman of the board and the think tank’s president can deliver the necessary information. For orientation at many think tanks, the new board member is invited to the think tank for an extended meeting with the president and introductions to key staff members. When the new member resides in another city, rules of common courtesy suggest that the president should visit the new member to provide the orientation, or at least offer to do so.

The orientation should include a summary of the organization’s history, because the current activities and attitudes are often heavily conditioned by its roots and early development. Additional topics to cover include:

* goals and objectives
* the current program of work
* recent successes in research and the policy process
* the organization’s communications and dissemination programs
* recent financial history
* fund-raising, especially if this has been a problem and year-to-year swings in financing have been significant, along with the strategy for dealing with funding problems
* any other current or impending problems that have been discussed with the board
* a quick review of the performance indicators being employed
* the institution’s key staff, highlighting each member’s special contributions.

Each new member should be given a package of materials about the organization: its charter and other legal documents are a must, as are current financial statements and the strategic plan if one exists. Annual reports for the past two or three years and examples of the think tank’s written products should also be included. It is doubtful that the new member will study these immediately. But he may turn to them if a particular issue arises, especially an urgent one. Lastly, provide him with a copy of this book or a similar guide that provides an in-depth discussion of not only boards’ responsibilities but think tank management more generally.

It is often said that board members learn best by asking questions.[[2]](#footnote-2) The one-on-one meeting with the president offers significant scope for such questions. But the president should also encourage any new member who wants to talk with senior staff members—both researchers and administrators—to go ahead.

No orientation is complete without a discussion of the new board member’s duties and the kind of role the organization hopes the member will play. This conversation can be led by the president or the chairman of the board. In either case, it should be guided by a statement produced by the board, ideally at the same time the board discusses specific candidates to serve. Most duties will be common to all members, including attendance at board meetings, active participation in the meetings, and so forth. But there may be particular tasks for some members. For example, a member with a strong financial background could be asked to take the lead in monitoring the organization’s financial condition and controls, presumably mostly by reviewing the annual external audit of the institution’s finances.

1. These two reasons are noted in Robinson (2001, 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This paragraph draws on Robinson (2001, 76–77). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)