

# After Thank You and Good-bye

## Holding the hearts of former board members

by Rebekah Burch Basinger



**T**his past spring, I was present as boards of three faith-based organizations said good-bye to mem-

bers completing their terms of service. The eight people whose farewells I observed had a combined 92 years of board work to their credit—an impressive record, to be sure, but not so impressive as the wisdom and wealth these men and women had contributed to the organizations. At least that's what the tributes spoken in their honor implied.

Affection between the departing board members and those remaining behind was palpable. Yet I couldn't help wondering: after the thank-yous and good-byes, then what?

CEOs and board leaders devote considerable time and energy to recruiting well-connected, talented, generous board members—or as Jim Collins puts it in *Good to Great*, to “getting the right people on the bus.” And once the “riders” are in place, even greater effort goes into equipping board members for the challenging ministry of nonprofit governance.

In turn, individual board members contribute considerable time and energy to governing well. Over the course of the usual eight- to 12-year board term, they advise, they make tough decisions, they give, and they pray.

Some also attend workshops and seminars to sharpen their governance know-how.

For a season, board members throw their minds, hearts, and financial resources into the organization, and then they leave. That's the cycle of board life. Despite declarations of continuing devotion, absence seldom makes the heart grow fonder—at least when it comes to former board members. In fact, the more apt cliché is “out of sight, out of mind.” Unless you are intentional about trying to stem the natural progression of things, all those years of service to

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*“Years of board service may quickly fade to a pleasant memory.”*

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your charity very quickly fade to a pleasant memory.

So back to my question: after the thank-yous and good-byes, then what?

**Ask first.** A logical first step is to ask soon-to-depart board members if and how they wish to be involved with the organization. It's a hard truth for CEOs and board leaders to accept, but I'll say it anyway. Not every board member desires a continuing relationship beyond his or her term of service.

Some people accept the nomination to a board out of loyalty to the charity. Others join as a personal favor to a CEO or board chair. This doesn't mean these

folks take their board work lightly. It's just that when their allotted terms of service come to an end, so does their sense of obligation to the organization. And that's all right. You can bless them and send them on their way, guilt-free.

Fortunately, the majority of board members will welcome a continued connection to the charity, even if it comes without as much power as they once had. Board members are generally passionate about the mission and purposes of the organizations they serve, and most are eager to do what they can to ensure a strong future for the organization. All you have to do is ask.

**Emeritus alternatives.** There are other ways to a former board member's heart than through emeritus status. Recognition and thanks for board service are always necessary and appropriate, but don't worry about hurting the feelings of outgoing members if you are selective in conferring emeritus or other honorary status. Reasonable people understand that for a special title to remain so, it must be conferred sparingly.

In fact, too many organizations fall back on the emeritus label from lack of creativity. It takes some work and advance planning to say a personal and appropriate farewell to outgoing trustees, but the more individually tailored the good-bye, the more likely it is to result in a lasting bond with the organization.

Depending upon organizational culture, the board member sendoff may include a roast where humorous remembrances are commingled with more serious words of appreciation. Some boards present departing members with a painting or

piece of pottery by a favorite local artist. Or there is the charity where a tribute rose bush is planted in a lovely garden just outside the headquarters building as a fragrant reminder of services provided.

The sky's the limit (tempered a bit by budget) when it comes to honoring the work of departing board members, so let your creativity flow.

**Realism.** Be realistic in what you promise. Caught up in a flurry of optimistic fervor, CEOs (and especially those new to the job) can fall into the trap of envisioning a level of involvement for former board members that simply isn't sustainable.

Take the idea of a special organization for past board members. It sounds easy enough, in theory. But when faced with staffing the group and giving it meaningful work to do, many CEOs discover they've committed to more than they can deliver. (And let's be brutally honest—board leaders may say they will take responsibility for staffing activities for former board members, but nine times out of 10, responsibility falls on the shoulders of the CEO.)

If you have the staff to support an alumni group for former board members, great. If not, the more prudent course is to capitalize on what already exists. For example, in addition to making certain that former board members receive the usual cycle of mailings (appeal letters, magazines, annual reports, etc.), be sure to include them on the distribution list for the CEO's newsletter to current board members. Personal invitations to organization events send a strong message that yesterday's board members still matter today.

And the list goes on. Even the smallest charity has more than enough going on to hold the attention of past board members.

**Not to be served, but to serve.**

When it comes to engaging the continued interest and involvement of exiting board members, "significant" is the word of the day. In fact, putting former board members to work on important and interesting projects is the sincerest form of appreciation. This might include:

- Asking departing members to write about what serving on the board has meant to them and then including their testimonials in the board handbook or as part of a board-only section on the organization's website.

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***“Too many organizations fall back on the emeritus label from lack of creativity.”***

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- Inviting top performers from each departing group of board members to sign on as mentors to the new crop of board members.
- Recruiting board members from the near past to help with special projects such as a capital campaign, CEO search, or strategic planning process.

**After thank you and good-bye.**

Immediately on the heels of your words of appreciation for board service should come an invitation to continued involvement. The goal, after all, isn't simply to rotate members off the board, but rather to rotate these most committed volunteers into new realms of service to the charity. When that happens, holding onto the hearts and interests of former board members won't be a problem. ☺

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