

# The Board Member Qualification Guide – An Excerpt

By Olan Hendrix

If boards exist to govern, then board members should have the abilities required to govern. This brings us back again to the need for a definition of governance. Once defined the board must have a framework for the performance of that work. Finally, there must be the agreed upon group discipline to govern and govern only.

Permit me to give here an overview list of three simple traits that can be identified in prospective board members.

The first and most obvious is an understanding of and passion for the ends for which the organization exists.

The second is the ability to think clearly, especially to think conceptually. The only tool of governance is words, and words are the result of conceptual thinking. This means translating values and perspectives into language and ensuring understanding of these words by the staff.

The third is the emotional ability that allows the board member to debate issues without always having to win the debate. Governance, if done by a group of human beings rather than one person, requires compromise, seeking of truth rather than consent and seeking the best for the ownership.

Even these qualities are not enough if there is not a quantifiable process for governance. Only a codified process actually enables governance to take place. Without it the work of a board ebbs and flows with the whims of the reigning personalities in the group.

Assuming this process is in place what should we look for in board candidates? The best summary I know of is by [John Carver](#) in Board Leadership, Number 23, Jan.--Feb. 1996. He said, "Most boards would fire their CEOs for filling staff positions as haphazardly as the board recruits for board positions." He went on to advise boards to look for board members who:

- Are visionary, able to create alternate futures.
- Are conceptual thinkers.
- Grasp the big picture.
- Are connected to the ownership.
- Demonstrate moral courage.
- Can work as a group.
- Accept and use authority.
- Can allow others to lead.
- In certain cases, have fundraising or other skills peculiar to a specific organizational need.

There is a powerful paragraph in The Policy Governance® Fieldbook, edited by Caroline Oliver, page 27:

"Boards need to look at the kinds of skills required to be on a Policy Governance® board. These include the ability to think about the future and to deal with abstract, qualitative ideas. Traditional boards are more likely to require members with skills that mirror organizational operations such as managing finance, fundraising, public relations and personnel. Under Policy Governance®, board members need to give up the satisfaction usually associated with making short term, concrete decisions and being involved in day-to-day operations; instead they will be linking with owners and shaping the organization's long-term future."

Board work at its best is difficult. At their best, boards lead leaders, not merely oversee staff work. This is leadership at its most demanding with the greatest consequence for the organization. We cannot afford to further jeopardize the process with a simplistic formula for selecting members.