

# Diversify the board... by personality type!

*A key to a high-functioning board is to intentionally bring together people with differing personality styles that make them well suited to play important behavioral roles.*

**BY PETER G. SPANBERGER AND SUSAN M. JACKSON**

**T**YPICALLY, when boards look for new members they primarily consider an individual's title, industry background, and functional expertise. They also look to achieve a diversity of gender and ethnicity. But they often do not consider diversity at its broadest level.

There are crucial roles that are necessary for a board to function optimally. Highly opinionated, forceful individuals are just as important to the group process as those who are consensus driven. Creative risk takers need to be balanced with cautious, detailed thinkers. The specific balance of roles that is needed depends on the unique characteristics of the board, the issues, the goals, and the current situation.

Problems in board functioning can be the result of an absence of a particular role. Boards can become bogged down in endless discussion as a result of not having anyone who knows when and how to bring closure to a discussion. High quality board decisions can partially be the result of having a board member who ensures that everyone

— and especially those who are knowledgeable but reticent — offer their best thinking. The roles of bringing closure and getting the best thinking out of everyone are just two of the many roles essential to optimal board functioning.

## **The must-have roles**

Roles are expected patterns of behavior that facilitate the work of the board. Listed below are some of the critical roles that every group, and especially boards, needs to have:

- **Synthesizing Information.** Board members typically have a lot of information but less than an ideal amount of time to process it. A member who can quickly take disparate pieces of information and synthesize it helps the entire board deal with information overload.

- **Building Consensus.** If a board reaches a point of having to work through varying points of view, a member who can build consensus and help pull the group together is invaluable. Such a person can sift through differences and find common ground.

- **Offering Wisdom.** An individual who brings wisdom to a board typically is quick to understand ramifications and



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is anticipatory. Through their knowledge and experiences, they have developed a sense that allows them to quickly sort through information and discern the crucial aspects. They can tell if the group is being pulled in the wrong direction and they often have a strong ethical or moral sense. Wisdom can include the balancing of long-term and short-term goals and the ability to make the best use of available knowledge. While those who possess wisdom may find that it increases with age, it is not limited to a particular age group, and not everyone of a certain age is wise.

- **Identifying the Essence of an Issue.** Someone who is astute at drilling down to the important, core element of an issue can prevent the board from wandering. Related to this is someone who helps the board stay focused on the appropriate issues at the appropriate level of abstraction.

- **Reminding the Board of Its Responsibilities and Processes.** Boards can be tempted to micro-manage at times, especially when issues within the company are tumultuous. It is helpful to have an individual who reminds the board of its purpose and responsibilities. It's not unusual for a board to drift as it wrestles with issues, so having someone who can identify and correct the drift can prevent problems and keep the functioning at the right level and on the right issues. This board member may remind the group that,

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publicly, they need to be in agreement, and that any disagreements should be worked out privately.

- **Eliciting Different Opinions.** Groups can easily be persuaded by the most vocal member, whose dominance sets the course. Yet a board member who can draw out the opinions of even the most reserved members allows the board to more comprehensively wrestle with the issues and consider a full range of options.

- **Thinking Critically.** The individual who questions carefully and respectfully helps the board think through issues thoroughly and can prevent the board from moving too quickly to a potentially flawed conclusion. This can also serve as a model of high-quality thinking for the entire board.

- **Bringing Closure.** It is also helpful in keeping the board focused if one of the members can dis-

cern when and how to bring a discussion to closure. Such an individual knows when to cut off dialogue and when to nurture it in order for the board to do a comprehensive analysis.

- **Equalizing Power.** A board member can make sure that no one individual or faction is overly influential. The individual employs techniques such as expanding the discussion, seeking other perspectives, and postponing a decision until further reflection and more options are considered.

- **Managing Dynamics.** A board member goes beyond content and reads and manages the dynamics on the board. This individual manages the culture of the board and judiciously uses humor to break tension or offer intellectual relief. This individual also helps diffuse strong emotions and gets the board back on track.

### Role assessment and development

It is good practice for a board to periodically reflect on the roles being played on the board as part of its regular self-assessment. Consideration can then be given to which roles may be missing and which roles may become lost as board members retire. Such an inventory can inform role development in current board members as well as build certain roles into the specifications for future board members.

Often, board members don't fully appreciate what personality traits and skills they bring to the boardroom. They can fail to intentionally use these to fulfill certain roles that would benefit the board. Board member development activities can be used to clarify expectations and raise awareness of behaviors that can help or hurt group process.

Additionally, such activities can inform members about their strengths and how to fully deploy them behaviorally in terms of manifesting essential roles. When an entire board participates in development, individual dysfunctional behavior can usually be discretely identified and mitigated.

Powerful people can sometimes be uncomfortable examining the roles that they play and they may hesitate at considering different behaviors. But failing to do so can impede the ability of the entire board. At its root, the development of a self-improvement orientation within the board is an important step in ensuring all the essential roles are being filled.

Once appropriate assessment and development within the current board has been done, board candidates can then be considered in light of needed but missing roles. It is difficult to ascertain many personal traits, especially through resumes and short interviews. However, in-depth interviews can

ascertain whether the candidate has the personality traits and skills needed to play essential roles.

### Managing role balance and tension

Once a board has achieved the optimal balance of roles for their needs, this diversity of characteristics needs to be well managed. Without appropriate attention, such a conglomeration of skills, personalities, and roles can lead to ineffectiveness. Some of the roles are by nature in conflict with other roles. Additionally, the existence of some roles without the balancing addition of other roles can lead to poor outcomes.

Each board member has an obligation to ensure that the roles they perform don't detract from the board's success. For example, someone who is highly opinionated, even contrarian, can challenge the board's thinking and expand its considerations. A questioning attitude, but without belligerence, can help the group avoid becoming too narrow. Overdone, and poorly delivered, a questioning attitude can be detrimental. Reading the reactions of others to one's behavior patterns can provide clues as to whether opinions are being appropriately delivered.

Tension between roles can be beneficial when well managed. A creative board member can offer new insights and considerations that may expand the board's thinking. Another board member can remain cautious and careful and prevent the board from straying too far from important basics.

Another tension that must be balanced is to have a board member who takes a short-term perspective as well as one who focuses on the long term. This keeps the board from inadvertently falling into one frame of mind and neglecting consideration of the other.

Given that these roles and personalities can be very different from each other, board members must demonstrate respect for and value these differences. The chair has a special responsibility in this regard. He or she has to be vigilant in making sure that none of these roles become overdone and that the tension between roles stays healthy.

### Look for critical holes

When a board is underperforming, it may be that critical roles are missing from the board composition or that the roles have somehow become out of balance. This is when self-assessment by the board members becomes critical. In addition, having an analysis of role composition conducted by a consulting psychologist can be invaluable. With such an analysis a better alignment of personalities and roles can be achieved. This can lead to more effective dynamic tension of roles as well as greater clarity in the position specifications for new board members.

A key to achieving high functioning in any board is to pay attention to its composition and the types and variety of roles being manifested. Intentionally bringing together people with differing personality styles, skills, and roles will offer the board the best opportunity to effectively perform its responsibilities. ■

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