

Board Nomination Process

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Background

In 2020, [Code for Science & Society](#) (CS&S) and [Invest in Open Infrastructure](#) (IOI) engaged [DeEtta Jones & Associates](#) (DJA) to develop a set of best practices for board governance, including documents supporting board nomination and onboarding, as well as broad best practices.

The following board nomination process is informed by the DJA Team's research on best practices; experience with board dynamics and equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism (EDIAR); and focus groups with IOI stakeholders. All background is laid out following the recommended process.

Philosophy

The board nomination process is an extension of an organization's values in action. It is not sufficient to simply recognize bias and systems of oppression associated with our board nomination process and expect to attract board members from racially and geographically diverse backgrounds. If we want to shift our over-reliance on insular networks and communities of practice to generate board nominations, then we must commit to the deliberate development of and adherence to inclusive practices which challenge the dominance of white, western cultural norms. The integration of anti-racist practices, which dismantle expectations around expertise, influence, affiliations, and titles in the vetting process, is in service of building a more representative board which reflects our global communities.

Furthermore, building toward a robust board orientation and onboarding is a key next step. Bringing together diverse perspectives for more creative and capacious work *requires* culturally competent facilitation and anti-racist practices for group process. A [Spencer Stuart report](#) noted that the best board onboarding programs are "tailored to take into account the unique backgrounds, experiences and expected committee responsibilities of each new director." Included in this process should be the mentorship of junior members to guide them in developing the skills and knowledge needed to successfully serve on the board.

Board members, then, should carry forward that work as they direct the work of the organization. A commitment to anti-racist practices will permeate the work of the organization. It's beyond the scope of this document to cover the details of board procedures and practice, but all of this starts with the nomination process: who is in the room has an effect on everything downstream.

Recommended Board Nomination Process

The following process is structured to enable a focus on needed qualifications and skills from potential board members, and a de-emphasis on traditional elements of fit, proximity, and hierarchy.

We have also provided a [worksheet](#) which can be used to enact the process as a pilot, as well as examples of how the worksheet would look at each step to illustrate the process.

- Step 1: Establish a nominating committee
 - If needed, take a few of your current board / steering committee members and a few outside voices (4-6 total) and form a committee
 - Set expectations and include training for mitigating implicit bias, recognizing privilege and positionality, shared accountability among committee members
 - Create space for speaking honestly about questions or gaps of knowledge in understanding privilege, oppression, and bias; develop process for how contentious issues and disagreements will be addressed
 - Establish goals: understand the timeline, process, limitations, desired outcomes.
 - Charge
- Step 2: Needs Assessment
 - Identify/review needed skills, networks, voices, specific dimensions of diversity, and other qualities of board members
 - Evaluate if the skills, networks, voices, etc. are influenced by factors such as institutional prestige, social media presence, desire for assimilation within the board, etc.
 - Assess which needed qualities are met fully by current board members, and which aren't or need bolstering.
 - Assign the qualities a priority: High/Medium/Low. Which qualities are most strategic to build on the Board for the upcoming term? This will form the criteria for assessing board prospects.
 - H = must have represented on the board if possible
 - M = not strictly necessary, but a strong asset
 - L = nice to have
- Step 3: Create a packet to be sent to prospects.
 - Include basic information about the organization, its goals, and current projects.
 - Description of the role: what are the expectations of board members?
 - The qualities you're looking to expand on the board.
 - Language should include definitions, commitments, seeking lived experiences beyond usual types of organizations/resourcing, explicit expectations that the board is meant to be multicultural but also that members have full voice and shared ownership. Onboarding has to support this element.
 - Values should be clearly stated in description with evidence of the organization's commitment to equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism
- Step 4: Prospect Generation
 - Within the board and the committee, identify an initial list of possible prospects and/or connectors.
 - Connectors: people who are likely to know exactly the person you need based on your criteria.

- Identify additional pathways through alumni associations and professional associations
- Evaluate these prospects based on your criteria list: not only for themselves, but based on the communities and connections they are likely to have.
- Reach out to prospects and ensure that there is a consistent experience for each person. First those that meet High priority criteria, then down the list to Medium and Low priorities.
 - Make template for reaching out which includes:
 - Inquiring as we look to expand our board
 - Not making any decisions yet: just compiling a list of prospects
 - Would you yourself be interested in hearing more? (if applicable)
 - We are particularly interested in knowing who you think might be a good match to these qualities...
 - Narrower is better. Ask about 1 or 2 of the top criteria that you selected this person for.
 - Can you share some details on those people? Where would we find out more about them?
 - We'll be doing an initial round of evaluation, then we might be back in touch with you to introduce us to the people you recommended. Stay tuned!
- As you receive recommendations and expressions of interest, track them on your list.
 - Note down what qualities recommenders raised about these people: no vetting or research yet.
 - Also track who recommended these people. Interesting to know if more than 1.
- When you feel you have enough candidates for now, stop. This will be relative to the number of positions you need to fill. You'll be vetting each of these people briefly, so don't overload yourself.
- Step 5: Initial evaluation
 - Using your rubric, evaluate each person on your list according to your criteria:
 - 3 = meets strongly
 - 2 = meets somewhat
 - 1 = familiar with
 - 0 = no known background
 - You may need to do some research for this. Feel free to ask their recommender for more information or starting places if you need it!
 - Drop anyone who is not a 3 in any of your H or M criteria
 - Sort the list to put the 3s in your H criteria first. These are the first people you'll contact.
- Step 6: Develop information
 - Contact each person at the top of your list (or ask for an introduction from the person who recommended them).
 - Start with enough people that, if all of them worked out, you would have all of your H criteria met, and some of your M criteria.
 - Divide these out among members of the nominating committee: make sure everyone

- Send them a brief description of the organization, the packet you've prepared, and why you are interested in speaking with them.
- Ask if they're interested in a board role, and if so, if they would be willing to meet with the nominating committee for 60 minutes to discuss.
- If confirmed, ask for current CV/resume, along with anything they'd like you to know about their work in your space.
- Draft an interview protocol that you'll use with all candidates
 - The interviews should be semi-structured: you'll want to learn some things from all candidates, but be open to broader conversation as the interview progresses.
 - Ask open-ended questions that center on the mission of the organization and the criteria you've developed.
 - Leave plenty of time for them to learn more about the organization.
 - Send the protocol to each candidate a couple of days before their interview, and ask if there's anything else they'd like to cover.
- Before the interview, research the candidate with respect to your criteria. Get a sense of their experience. Does your initial evaluation pan out? Are there additional relevant factors in their background? Assemble what you find into a shared space with the nominating committee.
 - Consider adding criteria to your rubric at this stage if you find you missed something!
 - Take notes on anything new you've learned
- During the interview, your aim is to find out these things:
 - Does this person meet the criteria we set out?
 - What perspective do they bring? Is that perspective already reflected by existing board members or a lot of other candidates?
 - What spaces will they introduce the organization to?
 - Also provide space for their questions about the organization's priorities.
- Once you have completed interviews with enough people that you're reasonably confident you have enough, proceed to the next step.
- Step 7: Detailed evaluation
 - By this point, you should have:
 - Interview notes from each candidate
 - Background information from each candidate (both that they provided and that you found)
 - Your initial evaluation of each candidate
 - Any updated details from your pre-interview research
 - All committee members review these details for all candidates
 - Discuss each candidate in turn, with the aim of updating your criteria evaluations.
 - Be open to discussing and recording qualities that weren't on your criteria list: these may be tiebreakers.
 - Also note any deal-breakers: if you learn that someone is wholly incompatible with the board strategy, don't discuss them further.

- By the end of this process, you'll have updated criteria evaluations for each candidate you interviewed.
- Step 8: Sorting
 - Reorder your candidate list to put your candidates with the most 3s in H (3H) criteria at the top, then fewer 3Hs, etc., then 3Ms with the most 2Hs, and on down. The exact ordering you use for this step will depend on exactly how your criteria are structured, but the goal is to put the most impressive individuals at the top.
 - Consider the first batch of candidates that would complete a board with all H criteria met with 3s.
 - Does this batch of candidates, along with the continuing board members, meet the needs you have?
 - What perspectives are missing with this batch of candidates?
 - What M and L criteria are also met by the group?
 - If the batch meets your goals, then proceed to step 8.
 - If not, consider your options:
 - Can you switch out one or two candidates to get the composition you need?
 - Can you add an additional candidate to fill a gap?
 - If a reasonable group is not found, consider returning to Step 5 to pull additional candidates from your original list.
- Step 9: Invitations and onboarding
 - Once you have the slate you want to invite to the board, send formal invitations to those candidates.
 - If all accept, you're done!
 - If not all accept, then you may have to return to Step 7 to fill in gaps, or to Step 5 to pull additional candidates.

Potential criteria and principles

DJA's experience is that *equity lives in the process*. Through identifying specific criteria and goals ahead of assessing individuals, you limit the space for racism, bias, and tendency to the norm.

We have identified several potential criteria that might be used in the above process. These are based on our experience, best practices, and the focus groups held with IOI stakeholders.

- **The Board should include both practitioners and established leaders:** Often, board membership is heavily focused on established leaders and decision-makers in their organizations and fields. Established leaders provide a crucial view and the ability to get things done. In the new board, this view should be balanced by members who are working practitioners, leading from the ground. Their views and experiences will guide the organization to prioritize realistic action that's informed by end user needs for infrastructure.
- **Culture add, not culture fit:** When we talk about "fit", we gravitate toward candidates who are like us: people who fluently speak our language (figuratively and literally), who represent ideas we resonate

with, and who we are comfortable with. The organization's growth and stability will depend on adding new cultural backgrounds to the Board. Which candidates could bring different perspectives and ideas to the Board? Which are *not* just like the "usual suspects"?

- **Potential and growth:** Just as board members will bring their experience and input to the work of the organization, the organization will invest in the potential and growth of its board members. Who would benefit from access to global conversations and a broader community of colleagues? What doors can the organization unlock? As an individual seeks to support infrastructure in their communities, how can the organization build upon that work and strengthen their success?
- **Different position titles and formal education paths:** Systems of power from the global north and western culture tend to prioritize hierarchical position (executives) and specific formal education (doctorates). This criterion interleaves with balancing established leaders with practitioners, and takes a different slant. What skills and background are needed on the board? How might candidates have developed those skills? What other paths would be valuable to have represented?

We also recommend particular guiding principles as a part of the process.

- **Identify candidates beyond your existing networks:** Our research shows a renewed focus in board recruitment on developing a broad prospect pool. Approaches might include tapping contacts from events outside the usual infrastructure space, seeking early-career prospects, or asking for recommendations for an additional layer outside the people you already know. A snowball approach like the one described in Step 3 above will help to generate leads outside of the steering committee's horizon.
- **Interrogate professionalism standards for coded language:** Conversations of fit and formal qualifications circle around the concept of *professionalism*. Keep an eye out for bias, racism, and exclusionary standards masquerading as professionalism.
- **Acknowledgement of privilege and oppression:** Seek out and interrogate how dynamics of privilege and oppression affect access to opportunities, background experience, and our perceptions.
- **Balance focus on "How do we become more diverse?" with "Why do we need to become more diverse?":** One of the strongest goals expressed by the focus groups was that IOI seeks to be a globally relevant collaboration. Adopting this attitude requires access to communities that are different from those inhabited by many members of existing boards in many organizations.
- **Aim for quality and strategy over quantity:** Large boards are not usually better than small ones. By identifying what key skills and roles need to be fulfilled by members of the board, you will be able to select a smaller, more agile team.

Outcomes of Focus Groups

DJA facilitated a series of four focus groups that explored the potential for composing a diverse board with anti-racist practice built in. There was one group of funders, one of IOI supporters, and two of current Steering Committee members. The outcomes were largely specific to IOI, but one area will be relevant broadly.

There was a particular conversation in two groups about the use of the word *anti-racist*. A handful of participants agreed that racism was a crucial element to be considered, but added that they don't understand the focus on race to the exclusion of other elements of diversity. They also noted that race has different meanings and importance in different cultures, so any organization will need to be careful in how it uses the word *anti-racist* in global contexts. Other participants reacted positively to the use of *anti-racist*: they saw it as an essential focus and a good starting place for framing these discussions in the present cultural context.

In our experience, these are not unusual reactions to the language of anti-racist practice. It's absolutely true that many dimensions of diversity interact with how the Board will nominate, onboard, and operate. There is a tendency as well to try to address all problems at once, to feel helpless in the face of multiple intersecting realms of systemic inequity, or to use the complexity as an (often unconscious) excuse for inaction.

That said, **DJA's experience and research supports the approach of prioritizing anti-racist action in the present environment.** We cannot boil the ocean: race and racism are central factors that make sense as a place to start. Any organization will do well to clarify its definition of anti-racism and the ways in which anti-racist approaches will benefit the organization, its collaborators, and the areas of infrastructure it addresses.

Best Practices in Board Dynamics and Composition for EDIAR

To conclude, we offer some particular best practices from our experience, research, and collaborators around EDIAR.

- Composition
 - Best practice in association management is trending toward smaller, more agile boards. This sort of structure enables more directed collaboration and strategic alignment.
 - Representation from different groups matters, but regardless of composition numbers, the board needs to center the need for inclusion and belonging.
 - Value intersectional identities and acknowledge dimensions of privilege and oppression.
 - Be intentional about approaching BIPOC candidates who are asked to serve on multiple boards, and aware of tokenism or perception of tokenism within the board.
 - Establish ongoing efforts to develop new relationships with prospective board members, even when it's not during a nomination period.
- Establish Community Norms/Code of Conduct
 - Develop norms within the board, establish shared understanding of definitions and meaning, and make sure norms and understanding align with mission and values.
 - Require adherence to norms by all board members.
 - Create a confidential pathway to surface concerns about violations.
 - Define consequences for violating community norms.
 - Integrate norms into position descriptions, website, presentations, etc.
- Challenge and grow

- Create intentional space for open dissent; comfort and control can't be guaranteed. Clear group process will support equity.
- Normalize interrogating the issue that is causing the problem, rather than the person who raised it.
- Be clear about the myth of a neutral or completely objective position.
- Encourage asking questions to avoid assumptions.
- Account for missing perspectives in conversations and decisions, but only speak from personal experience.
- Embed EDIAR in behaviors and practices
 - Remind and reinforce EDIAR responsibilities of all board members on a regular basis.
 - Create the role of EDIAR Leader for each meeting, and rotate this role among members.
 - Designate a portion of standing meetings to discuss EDIAR topics, in addition to examining other agenda items through an EDIAR lens.
 - Set the expectation that EDIAR isn't one person's responsibility for solving.
 - Revisit EDIAR efforts in past decisions and discuss how those decisions may have been handled differently.
 - Give recognition to EDIAR successes and accomplishments.

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