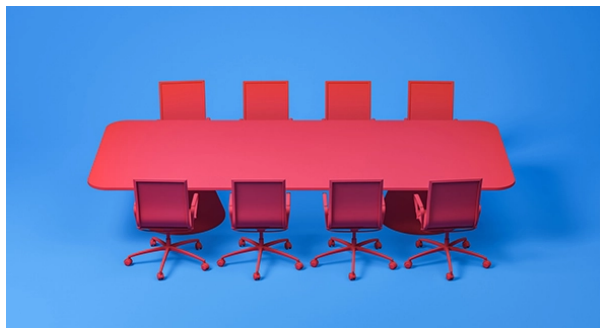


Governance

# Open Board Search

How a new approach to recruiting board members can transform nonprofits.

By [Cleveland Justis](#), [Susan S. Boren](#), [Stephanie Duncan Karp](#) & [Daniel Student](#) | Jul. 31, 2025



Whether a result of success or a symptom of stasis, nearly every nonprofit reaches a point where their current governance structures no longer serve them. Many nonprofits struggle to attract and retain board talent. When they do, new members rarely lead the organization in new directions. In our experience as nonprofit leaders and consultants, we have long wondered if there was a better, more effective way to grow and evolve board leadership.

Why are nonprofit boards inherently resistant to change? Too many rely on their own networks to identify and onboard new board members. According to BoardSource's most recent "[Leading with Intent](#)" report, the top two methods for identifying potential new board members are "board members' personal or professional networks" (96%) and "CEO/ED's personal or professional networks" (88%). These overlapping networks create an insider-centric culture among nonprofits that perpetuates the status quo, replicating strategies and approaches that may no longer be relevant, and taxing a small group of over-extended board members who serve on multiple boards. Particularly in a time where resilience is more important than ever, organizations stuck in echo chambers will struggle to remain relevant and effective over time.

Unsatisfied with the status quo, some nonprofits are embracing an innovative board recruitment practice: an open, competitive application process that is more akin to a public job listing than a personal reference made behind closed doors. Marketing the opportunity competitively rather than making the ask to a few, this practice dramatically reshapes the board's relationship to its organization and its mission. We call this evolving practice "open board search."

Organizations are using open board search to address varying needs. Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), one of the nation's largest land trust organizations, had attracted a powerful, well-connected board. But coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, many board members would soon reach their term limits. Simultaneously, the organization had completed a strategic plan calling to expand POST's programs in equitable access, climate, and biodiversity. To find a new cohort of highly skilled board members with the time and ability to serve, as well as experience and expertise in these new focus areas, POST needed to cast a wide net.

Rue Mapp created the nonprofit Outdoor Afro to raise the visibility and leadership of Black people in nature. Leveraging her background as an environmental grant maker in the San Francisco Bay Area, she was able to attract powerful leaders from the region's conservation movement to her board of directors. But Outdoor Afro quickly outgrew its California beginnings, with programs gaining traction in every region of the United States. It faced strategic opportunities that could change its business model, including a move into outdoor retail. The existing board was supportive but recognized they lacked the networks and expertise needed to take the organization to its next level. Mapp wondered if a public call for board members could attract the entrepreneurial leaders her organization needed next.

Filoli, a historic home and garden on the San Francisco Peninsula, was making a commitment to better represent its audience on its board—many of whom were raising families and reflected the racial and ethnic diversity of the Bay Area. Filoli had a vision to radically change its board composition by growing the number of seats and recruiting heavily from underrepresented communities. The board knew it might struggle to attract the civic leaders it was seeking through its own limited networks, so it decided to open its doors through a publicly marketed search.

These three organizations shared an underlying challenge—limited networks—and found success using open board search, an underutilized but effective approach to recruitment. Historically, open board search has been used by some membership- and chapter-based organizations (typically promoting the opportunity among its membership), but it is not widely practiced by the majority of nonprofits. As more organizations adapt the practice—throwing the doors open even wider to the general public—many are finding it to be effective in solving common and entrenched governance issues.

The co-authors of this article have recruited countless board members using traditional, invite-only methods. Since 2020, we have supported 15 open board searches for nonprofits across the United States. From our perspective, the results of an open process are astonishing. To enhance our understanding of how the practice is playing out in the sector, we spoke with search committee leaders as well as newly placed board members—some we have worked with, others we have not—about how the results of open board search are impacting their organizations. We surveyed these and additional organizations who have brought on new board members through an open process, receiving 35 responses. These organizations describe strong early results from their open board search efforts: attracting new talent and resources, increasing board engagement, and improving strategic thinking.

# Self-Replicating Boards

Most nonprofit boards and their staff learn board recruitment from their predecessors without questioning the reasoning behind the practice or examining its results. This tends to perpetuate an outdated board service model based in risk aversion, patronage, and perceived scarcity.

## Risk Aversion

Risk aversion guides many nonprofit governance decisions. Some boards believe bringing on "outsiders" who are less familiar with the organization will cause more problems than it solves: slowing down progress, dragging down culture and morale, or making irrelevant suggestions for change. Nonprofit leaders also fear offending donors and high-status community members who propose themselves or their friends for the board.

## Patronage

Serving on the board of a well-funded organization can be seen as a mark of prestige and is a way to reward nonprofit donors. The tendency to recruit this way prioritizes short-term giving over long-term connection-building. Further, the philanthropic community is relatively small compared to the general public and has many overlapping networks. A select few leaders are frequently asked to serve on multiple boards, leaving board members overextended, too busy to be of deep service to any one organization.

## Scarcity

Another common problem is that nonprofits operate from a position of perceived scarcity, recruiting board members from a small pool of busy individuals by promising to limit the amount of work required. These same organizations will wonder why board members do not routinely attend board meetings and events or are underprepared when they do. Serving on a board is a commitment equivalent to a part-time job. If board members are not prepared for this commitment, they should probably not join a board—but many nonprofits are shy to give this feedback or to turn away members who are not meeting expectations.

## Disrupting the Status Quo

To build resilience in the face of problems that are complex and ever-changing—technological disruption, financial and political upheaval, global pandemics, and climate change—boards need wider perspective and broader skillsets. Simply stated, to increase the effectiveness of nonprofits, we need to throw open the doors to the boardroom.

Organizational sociology as far back as Mark Granovetter's "[The Strength of Weak Ties](#)" (1973) emphasizes the importance of individuals and organizations having diverse connections and networks. The most innovative and effective nonprofit and corporate boards are inclusive of a

broad array of perspectives, skills, and communities. As Jane Wei-Skillern and Nora Silver put it succinctly, "Build constellations, not stars."

An open board search taps into new, previously unknown networks of talent. Bringing on individuals less familiar with the organization also prompts boards to formalize and clarify roles, which in turn encourages a reevaluation of board structures, systems, culture, and norms. The organizations who have embraced this practice describe the process as significantly changing the culture of their boards in a lasting way.

## New Talent and Resources

Eighty-five percent of our survey respondents agree or strongly agree that the open board search connected their organization to new communities and networks. The same number agree or strongly agree that their board reflects a broader range of backgrounds and perspectives as a result of the search. No respondents disagree with either statement. These are some of the clearest indicators that open board search delivers on its promises.

Leaders of an open search are consistently surprised by the breadth and quality of applicants. With comprehensive applicant data for nine of the 15 open board searches we supported, these searches received a combined total of 607 applications, an average of 67 applicants per search (the median is 51). These numbers challenge many nonprofits' assumptions about who may be willing to dedicate time and resources to the organization. "The number of people was surprising. It really spoke to the impact and attraction of the organization," says Mapp of Outdoor Afro's first search (they have now conducted two).

"We had the great problem of being overwhelmed with exceptional candidates," says Jen Lynch, search task force chair of POST. Many boards bring on more members than anticipated because of the quality of the applicant pool. NatureBridge, a national outdoor education nonprofit, reported its board only planned to bring on three to four members. "We ended up adding seven," says Phillip Kilbridge, President & CEO, "largely because of the incredible talent we realized we could bring on board."

An open process can also dispel myths about the perceived difficulty of increasing diverse representation on a board. Walter Moore, former president and CEO of POST, worked with Potrero Group to conduct an open board search in 2022. "Some board members, having had the experience of recruiting one at a time, held the perspective that it is really hard to find candidates of color," says Moore. "When you open the search, you realize that just isn't true: the candidates are out there, they just haven't been asked."

One perceived risk of an open search is that if you open the doors to more people than you can ultimately onboard, you must make uncomfortable declines. Many nonprofits worry this will sour relationships with potential supporters (another risk-averse governance decision). However, most of our interviewees described positive experiences with declined candidates, especially when applicant relationships were handled with care.

"I think there was a big concern that there was going to be some negative pushback if applicants weren't selected. Fortunately, there was none," says Angela West Blank, who conducted Groundswell Conservancy's search without the help of a consultant. "We were very intentional about how we met and dealt with the candidates who came through our pipeline. It takes some time, but we reached out to all of them in specific ways, whether they were part of the onboarded cohort or not."

Sixty-four percent of survey respondents indicated that the open board search introduced them to candidates who engaged with their organization in other meaningful ways. Several organizations cultivated donor relationships with declined applicants. In one case, a candidate realized he could not fully commit to board service at that time. This candidate remains close to the organization and continues to tap his personal network in their service, making significant fundraising and programmatic contributions. Several interviewees spoke about applicants who were not chosen for board service initially but who joined a committee or joined the board later. We found little evidence that applicants who made it as far as an interview were unsatisfied with how they were treated or unwilling to support the organization going forward, a strong indication that the network benefits of an open application process far outweigh the risks.

## Increased Engagement

In traditional board recruitment, nonprofits approach potential board members from a place of need and perceived scarcity. When candidates apply to serve on the board, the relationship begins on an entirely different footing.

"They are coming to us saying, I've determined that now is the right time to contribute my time and skills, I am attracted to your mission, and I am eager to make a contribution," says Kilbridge.

Nanhi Singh, who was selected to join POST's board, spoke about how the application process itself shaped her experience and readiness to serve. "I was delighted to be invited to interview because POST is an organization I have admired for so long. I came out of it feeling as if I had just been through an exploration of my personal value system. The questions really made me dig into who I am and answer, 'why do I even want to do this?'"

A consistent theme in our interviews is that board members attracted through an open search are setting a higher standard for participation and leadership for other members. This appears to be shifting these boards' cultures toward a higher level of engagement—and is causing some to rethink how they manage their board's renewed energy and interest.

"It has put a lot more pressure on us, on how we work with our board, its structures, communications. We have had to adapt," says Kara Newport, president and CEO of Filoli. "Overall, our board has leveled up. It is driving a new level of professionalism, and we are rising to the new standard." Seventy-two percent of survey respondents indicated that the search prompted the board to clarify or evolve its governance practices.

The open search process itself can increase engagement even before new members are onboarded. POST's Lynch recalls, "Because the search process was public, we had to be on the

same page about exactly what we were looking for and why so we could talk about it consistently in public settings. That doesn't always happen in traditional recruitment, when it's the job of a few people working quietly behind the scenes." Lynch also noted that members were even more active in onboarding and informing new members than they had been in the past.

## Strategic Thinking

Accordingly, a more engaged board asks better strategic questions. Eighty-four percent of survey respondents agree or strongly agree that open board search improved their board's strategic thinking and engagement, showing that new voices are raising the bar for leadership and strategic capacity. Additionally, 90% strongly agree or agree that members are bringing meaningful strategic perspectives that positively influence board culture.

Following POST's board search, Lynch noted that as current members oriented new board members, they adopted a more curious, learning-oriented mindset. "We went from being a group of insiders who all assumed we knew what we were talking about, to a group of people who were stepping back more often and saying, 'Here's how we got here. Wait—how did we get here?'" With more outside perspective, we discovered questions we hadn't asked and angles we might have missed."

Candidates who come to boards through an open recruitment process also bring fewer preconceived notions about the organization and its work, posing challenging strategic questions that help move the organization forward. This in turn puts organizations on a path to evolve. In nearly all of the organizations we have partnered with on open board search, the period following the search was marked by significant growth. Others also noted increases in revenue, especially individual giving. With new connections to donors forged through the public search, one interviewee said, "Within months, our search paid for itself three times over."

## Elements of an Open Board Search

We have identified five critical steps to a successful open board search: agreement on the need for change, a well-defined job description prioritizing "culture add" over "culture fit," a competitive open application process, a selection process that mitigates bias, and onboarding a cohort with intentional orientation practices.

### Agreement on the Need for Change

When board members and staff leadership agree on the need for change, an open board search offers an effective solution. Once there is buy-in, organizations must establish a clear roadmap that inspires trust in an open, public process.

The months-long process of an open search can sometimes uncover the need to clarify the organization's intent with its existing networks and explore new governance practices to support an inclusive board culture. Consistent and transparent communication with the organization's stakeholders helps to ease concerns. POST's search committee chairs held many conversations

with the rest of the board and staff to discuss the process's potential benefits and challenges and the work it would require from them. "With any new process, there are going to be questions and concerns," says Moore. "The key was ensuring the board fully engaged with each other on the topic and that all opinions were heard. When individuals saw their feedback was incorporated, it lowered worries and got people excited to spread the word."

## Job Description Prioritizing 'Culture Add' Over 'Culture Fit'

An understanding of the holistic diversity of skills, networks, leadership styles, personal approaches, and lived experiences that will foster an ideal board culture is critical to a successful open board search. Nonprofits embracing open board search therefore seek candidates that embody a "culture add" rather than a "culture fit." The latter term implies alignment with existing norms, while "culture add" emphasizes the potential to contribute to the growth and evolution of the organization over time.

"We used the traditional board composition chart in the past, but this time we were really looking for different people with different types of attributes, styles, backgrounds, and diverse experiences," says Groundswell's West Blank. "We went beyond basic skills and asked our board about personal style. We wanted to know: Are you a consensus builder? An implementer? A motivator? A visionary? We wanted to get a mix."

Seeking "culture add" asks leaders to step beyond the comfort offered by familiar, well-known board candidates. Critical discussions among board members, staff leaders, and external stakeholders can help assess the organization's potential gaps and needs, uncover the ideal attributes, skills, and strengths of candidates, identify the strengths of the board's existing culture, and bring to light new communities and professional sectors that could provide a pipeline talent.

To prepare to market their public board search, most organizations create a thorough, thoughtful, and professionally designed position profile or job description that generates excitement about the opportunity. This helps to set expectations for incoming members and communicates the qualities the board is seeking. "We spent a lot of time thinking about the language of the position description," says West Blank. "We made it very clear who we were looking for, so the people who were receiving the position description would take a pause and really think about it before applying 'just because.'"

"We worked to ensure that the set of characteristics we sought were focused on where we are trying to go, and not where we've been," says Jean Taylor, president and CEO of Minnesota Public Radio and American Public Media Group. Given both the technological and financial disruptions facing public media, Taylor and her search committee thought creatively about who could help them navigate a rapidly changing landscape. They identified media and music innovators, business model disrupters, people who had led through significant change management, and people who understood digital strategy and rapidly evolving technology as high-priority candidate profiles.

As in an executive search or recruitment effort, developing a job description requires the search committee to distinguish between "must-haves"—candidate qualities the organization is

unwilling to compromise on—and "nice to haves." We encourage organizations to remain clear but include both: this helps target key individuals but still leaves room to consider candidates who bring something unexpected and significant. The search task force needs to be able to articulate their criteria when publicizing board positions and share a clear understanding of the criteria when evaluating prospective applicants.

## Competitive Open Application Process

This step marks the key difference between an open board search and traditional board recruitment: opening the doors to anyone interested in contributing to the organization through a structured application process.

An open board search leverages the organization's extended networks and loose ties to get the word out about the opportunity. This calls on everyone in the organization—board, staff, customers and clients, as well as partners—to be an ambassador.

"We engaged everyone. First through our board and staff, and then our partner groups that were more racially and economically diverse," says West Blank. "It was a team effort. We had volunteers reaching out to people and organizations, we had lists of different groups, emails, social media, and website posts, and advertisements targeted to BIPOC audiences and media outlets. We reached out broadly to groups we didn't know well and directly to individuals we thought would make particularly great applicants. It worked out well; we had more candidates apply than we expected, and that output felt great."

Asking prospective board members to apply can feel like a big ask. "One of our biggest concerns was that people with the skills and experience we were seeking wouldn't want to do an application process," says Lynch. "But we also recognized that we were looking for board members who had deep commitments to equity, and that those people might be drawn to POST precisely because this was an open, equitable process that consciously sought alignment between our values and those of our candidates. And by and large, we did find that. The candidates were remarkably gracious in the process, including those we did not ultimately select."

Shane Douglas joined Outdoor Afro through its first open board search in 2020. "I had spent ten years in the Bay Area and was familiar with Outdoor Afro. But at the time of their search, it was peak COVID and I was living in London. A friend who knew me well and had worked with Rue followed Outdoor Afro on social media—this friend sent the post to me, 5,000 miles away. Without that post I would never have known about the opportunity."

Though the connection was made over a great distance, the cause was very close to Douglas. "Outdoor Afro's mission to inspire Black joy and leadership in nature connects deeply with who I am as a person. I've spent my whole life in community while in nature. Given these life-changing experiences outdoors with my parents, my siblings, my friends, my wife, and more recently, with my young son, I can't think of any other organization where the mission is as tied so closely to both my personal mission and my identity." Since joining the board, Shane has moved to Washington, D.C., which also happens to be where Outdoor Afro has the most participants. Here, he is connecting with local program leaders while advocating for policies that support the

organization's goals. As a result of his positive experiences on the board, he now serves as board chair and led Outdoor Afro's second open board search last year.

Undertaking an open board search communicates the organization's commitment to transparency and inclusivity while bolstering its brand identity. It is a public proclamation of who the organization is, what it values, and its vision for the future. The visibility created by this process can inspire even more communities to see themselves as relevant to a nonprofit and its board. It effectively targets potential candidates and elevates the organization's presence within the communities it wishes to connect with—whether or not these individuals ultimately join the board.

Sydney Leung joined the Filoli board through the American Alliance of Museums' Facing Change Initiative, an ongoing effort to increase diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion in museums. Since joining he has chaired two open board searches. "As a gay Asian immigrant, I understand why Filoli needed to expand our outreach with underrepresented communities and networks at the level of the boardroom," says Leung. "We've made intentional, thoughtful, and mission-aligned requests to board members and other stakeholders to help us build meaningful, long-term relationships that bridge these connections."

Filoli has also instituted a policy that board members who have served two terms must reapply through the same process as new members. "This helps us bring on a cohort with a holistic view to what the board needs at that moment," says Filoli's Kara Newport. "It helps level set the new applications we're receiving, too—they need to be as strong or stronger than the members who are reapplying. But also, people change: the application process gives our board members a chance to reengage how they want to engage, to share with us what is important to them now versus when they first joined."

## Intentional Selection Process Mitigating Bias

Most organizations conduct at least two rounds of interviews with candidates after collecting application materials. These interviews provide ample opportunities for candidates to share how their unique experiences inform their potential in the role. Using the position profile or job description prepared at the beginning of the process, many employ a standardized evaluation rubric that guides candidate assessment and helps mitigate bias. These criteria can extend beyond mere technical competencies and delve into how a candidate's unique perspectives and experiences will contribute to board culture and align with its mission.

"We made sure we had a rubric that we evaluated all our candidates against because it's common to go through an interview process adjusting what's important based on a personal connection," says Olivia White Lopez from POST, who employed evaluation criteria as a mechanism to mitigate bias in their search. "People will often lean in one direction or another based on their own backgrounds, preferences, and perspectives. Standard evaluation criteria help the team collectively agree on which attributes are most important and how to measure them before going through the screening process."

Many also consider the composition of the incoming cohort as well as individual contributions. A balanced approach ensures that new board members complement one another.

One of the powerful aspects of an open board search is the discovery of people who are passionate about the organization and its mission, even if they may not be the right additions to the board at this time. It is common for boards to fill their board pipeline through a search, bringing people onto committees first or onboarding them in future years.

Consistent, transparent, and nuanced communication with all candidates throughout the search supports future engagement with the organization after the search has closed. "We had over 50 people expressing deep interest in what we do, and so we made a strong point to make sure that we were carefully handling and being available to our candidates," says Moore. "Even if they didn't make it, we circled back and were very clear, respectful, and appreciative of their time."

## Onboarding a Cohort With Intentional Orientation Practices

Those employing this practice mention the importance of onboarding a cohort of three or more new board members at a time. Bringing on multiple people at once can facilitate a shift in the board's dynamics. It also appears to nurture a culture of collaboration and knowledge exchange as new board members learn from one another and collectively contribute fresh insights to ongoing initiatives.

A thoughtful, intentional onboarding process sets the stage for new board members to smoothly integrate into the board's culture and understand their roles and how they can best engage. Many assign current members as mentors to new board members to act as friendly and consistent touchpoints that can help share institutional knowledge, connect members, and provide a platform for candid conversations about board dynamics, expectations, and best practices.

"Our new board members came in with a lot of energy and a strong desire to be engaged," says Kilbridge. "It can take significant time and investment to orient them and give them enough information to get going, but it's absolutely worth it."

## Progress, Not Perfection

Open board search presents many compelling opportunities, but it also poses some challenges. As more organizations adopt open board search, we may see some of these resolve through a culture of shared learning and best practice. Others may be inherent risks of the process.

## Significant Time Investment

Investing in a relationship with every applicant takes significant time and resources: providing timely updates, expressing gratitude through thank-you notes, offering opportunities for additional informational interviews, and following up in the months and sometimes years after the search has ended. Several organizations report a sense of overwhelm at the amount of relationship management an open board search requires. In our own practice, we are encouraging

organizations to think through opportunities for engaging applicants well in advance of the recruitment phase and to engage board and staff in supporting that engagement from the very beginning of the process.

## Mixed Results Increasing Diverse Representation

Many nonprofits look to open board search to solve a lack of representation. Nonprofits that are successful in their efforts to recruit from underrepresented groups make deliberate choices to prioritize that representation over other qualities, including prior board experience. We observe that it helps to be specific about the diversity the organization is seeking and to tie how that perspective and lived experience will directly contribute to the organization's mission and goals. However, the complexity of choosing to join spaces with extreme under-representation carries inherent personal and professional risk for potential board members. Of the nonprofits we spoke with that struggled with recruitment, many recognize the strengths of the open board search process and are continuing to invest time and resources in public recruitment as a commitment to long-term change.

## Expect Some Attrition

The number of board members selected through this process can vary widely. Some nonprofits have brought on as many as 10 members at a time. Accordingly, some attrition appears common among larger cohorts. A mismatch of communication styles or poorly communicated expectations account for some (and accordingly, some had the experience that candidates self-selected out of the process as these expectations were made clear). Some wished they had conducted more thorough background checks on candidates, which many boards are not accustomed to doing when recruiting from within their own circles.

In our own practice, we recommend nonprofits be very explicit about their expectations of board members and make these clear in their position profile or job description. How many additional events or social engagements are board members expected to attend in addition to board meetings? How much time can board members expect to put toward committee work? What is the board's culture around availability and responsiveness? Are there fundraising or giving expectations? Clearly defined expectations set the stage for direct feedback about performance. As is always the case, it is appropriate to ask board members who are not meeting expectations to step down.

## A New Path Forward

As institutions working in the public interest, it is imperative that nonprofit boards become inclusive of people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, races, geographies, genders, orientations, and skills. We know that status quo recruitment is not yielding that diversity. Moreover, the status quo poses a network problem: the vast majority of nonprofits do not maintain the loose ties and extended networks they require to function effectively. This is diminishing the potential and hampering the success of the entire nonprofit sector.

The journey toward a more effective, networked, and inclusive nonprofit board begins with a deliberate decision to embrace change and actively seek out new voices and perspectives. The open board search process offers a transformative pathway to achieving this goal, enabling organizations to build boards that are not only reflective of the communities they serve but also well-equipped to navigate the complex challenges of our time. By making the choice to embark on an open board search process, nonprofits can unlock the full potential of their organizations and create lasting positive impacts on their missions and communities.

This work is complex, evolving, and ongoing, and best practices are still emerging. We look forward to further results as more organizations embrace open board search to enhance their organizational effectiveness. We need strong institutions and a thriving nonprofit sector now more than ever.

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