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Growth

Advisory board members help keep it real

by ADINA GENN

Selecting members for an advisory board? Try looking beyond the usual attorneys and financial types, though it's always good to keep them in the loop. Think carefully about your board's mission and choose candidates whose reach and opinions will give your organization mileage beyond the boardroom.

Cathy Morelli, a career services representative at Chubb Institute, a technical-career school in Westbury, did just that while assembling an advisory team.



"We really wanted to see what we can do to better prepare students and what industry trends to pursue in the future," Morelli said. "We tried to select candidates who're in different disciplines, from large and small companies who've hired our students and from those who haven't but are interested in what we're doing and the services we're providing. It gave them an opportunity to see what we have in the pipeline."

Tapping clients and prospects helped Morelli better understand the market and her customers - perspectives any organization, whether a small business or nonprofit organization, would appreciate. The effort also fosters partnerships among board members, broadening horizons and offering everyone involved a competitive edge.

A group that is diverse, either skill-wise or geographically, can supply insights that might be otherwise overlooked.

Chubb's advisory board includes members of the local medical community, graphic-art firms, IT companies and staffing agencies. By consulting with the group, Morelli and her colleagues saw the need to consider a more in-depth internship program. They discovered that customer-service skills are crucial in today's workforce and that troubleshooting skills, rather than applications alone, are a must-have in the medical field. They also decided to follow up with graduates to find out how to improve the program.

But even the most insightful advice can be tough to swallow. It's easier to digest critiques upon recognizing that new perspectives can only strengthen an organization.

"We certainly had positive feedback, but by learning about the not-so-positive, we can improve. It's just as important to learn what the negatives are," Morelli said. "By learning that, you can strengthen the curricula to make it better for the next group of graduates."



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Ray Ann Havasy, director of the Center for Science Teaching and Learning, or CSTL, in Port Washington and Rockville Centre, takes a similar approach. While some nonprofits are nervous about what they might hear, Havasy views the process as "only positive," adding that businesspeople are aiming to help when they offer feedback, whether good or bad.

CSTL, an organization that offers science learning to children, teachers and communities, is moving into the 17-acre Tanglewood Preserve in Rockville Centre. While the county has a grant to renovate the grounds and ponds, CSTL is restoring the three buildings on the preserve. The advisory board will "help us love the place back to life," Havasy said.

The people on that board come from assorted businesses. There's an office furniture rep, an IT expert, an electrician, a fundraiser and a banker, and each offers services and provides access to other people who can donate their own time, money and services.

Havasy views advisory boards and the organizations with which they work as partnerships. Everyone is working toward a common goal. For board members, being involved in the advisory process serves as a foundation for developing new resources and a platform for showcasing their own work.

The contractor who installs windows for CSTL, for example, could bring prospects to the park for a reference instead of disturbing clients at their homes.

Havasy plans to list advisory board members on the organization's Web site, www.cstl.org, after it is revamped. That effort helps members with their branding campaigns.

Andrew Edson, president of Andrew Edson and Associates, a public and investor relations and consulting firm with offices in Jericho, Melville and Manhattan, recently began serving on an advisory board at the University of Memphis, his alma mater.

The school wanted new ideas to attract students and faculty, and Edson said having geographically diverse board members has provided fresh perspectives.

"There are one or two others [besides me] from out of town," Edson said. "They provide a refreshing viewpoint and render a detached opinion. We listen to presentations, absorb and offer opinions based on what we hear."

In exchange, Edson appreciates the chance to broaden his circle and expand his horizons.

Those advantages are worth promoting to potential board members. While some businesses offer a stipend, many small companies can't afford to do that. Owners can show their appreciation, however, with a meaningful gift or by meeting offsite for a golf outing or some other event that the member would enjoy, Edson said.

Even a company of one can benefit from an advisory board, he said. "You can announce the people on it and get publicity for the company. It could lead to [new] business."

And sometimes benefits come unexpectedly.

After a recent meeting at Chubb, for instance, one member followed up by visiting the school and speaking with students. "It was so valuable to students," Morelli said. "They received first-hand information and answers to questions about their entry into the medical field." In addition, she's meeting with one of the staffing companies as a result of the advisory board.

The meetings lay the groundwork for upcoming dialogs, Morelli said, adding, "If we understand one another, we can work better."