



5 September 2008 – Gain Introduction Session for Organisations. Oval Houses shares their experience of participating in the Gain Programme 2006/07.

Oval House took part in the GAIN programme the last time round and had a very successful experience, so I've been asked to talk about what worked for us following a self examination of our part in the process.

1) What are you looking for?

Keep an open mind about the qualities you are looking for in a Board Member - all Boards need skills, such as lawyers, or fundraisers, or HR consultants, but just as important is the Board's role as an advocate for your work. There will often be opportunities for new Board Members to contribute in ways that are not obvious at first. For example, one of our GAIN Board Members was able to provide us with some useful contacts of potential partner venues for a Southern African tour.

You have to recognise that, though highly qualified, many GAIN participants are new to voluntary boards in general and their actual skills can emerge and develop as they come to learn how the board operates. Accept that it is a process of discovery and look at those you interview in relation to your work and ways they can advocate that work. My advice would be to not be too prescriptive about the skills that Board Members possess, and instead look for Board Members who have a connection or interest in your work in some way, as this will maintain their enthusiasm long after the tables have been cleared at tonight's reception.

Another thing is I think you need to be self aware about your board in order that you can be clear about the commitment you demand of your Board Members. Do you have a board who really want to involve themselves in the running of the organisation and that you, for example, expect to write a funding application or do you have a board that is happy to be hands off and offer advice when needed? These might seem extremes but the approach will determine the kind of contribution you will get from new members, and whether they feel they can support you in the ways that you ask.

2) What are they looking for?

A key factor for success in the GAIN programme is recognising that it is a two-way process. Don't forget to sell yourself and talk up the positive work that you do. One of our GAIN Board Members hadn't heard of or considered Oval House before we sought her out at the reception. We felt that her interests and experience matched well with certain areas of our own work, so we asked to be introduced to her and then waxed lyrical about our work in her areas of



interest. She is now one of our most vocal and enthusiastic advocates and was recently appointed to an Honorary Officer role.

You want both the organization to be attractive and the management of that organisation to be attractive. Like many Board Members GAIN participants are busy professionals, and they don't want to be on your Board for the sake of being on a Board. They want to feel a connection with your organisation and to feel they can make a meaningful contribution to its development. You need to show them where that connection exists.

3) Introducing new members onto the Board:

So you've found a great potential Board Member, they love your organisation, you love their interest and enthusiasm, so what next?

You need to be pro-active in welcoming candidates onto the Board, and you may wish to involve current members in this process. As well as asking potential Board Members to a meeting, invite them to see your work and send them details of upcoming activity. Do not expect new Board Members to be on the phone every day - you should do the work in setting the timetable for introduction and offering information to build up Board Members knowledge of your work. It is important to realise that Board Members will have different needs. Identify as best you can how new members can contribute and manage their expectations and involvement in as open a way as you can.

Once new members join a year of "after care" is involved. It is about maintaining enthusiasm with invites to shows and other events, arranging training, briefings, other one-to-ones, interesting board meetings (believe it or not!) with, for example, briefings from different departments.

So in summary - sell yourself, be open minded, accept that it is a longer term process, put care and thought into it, recognise that it is your organisation who should do the nurturing and running and let the new and surprising ways people can contribute develop organically - as opposed to saying "oh we want someone with legal experience and that's the beginning and end of it". That is the most important message for you today.