

Attracting and Developing Young Board Leaders at the United Way of Abilene

By: Ruth McCambridge

A conscious pursuit of younger board members has combined with clear expectations to help the United Way of Abilene evolve into a stronger organization that meets the needs of the West Central Texas residents it serves as well as the people who serve on its board.

This evolution has come in part as a result of its leader's recognition that change was needed. Several years ago, CEO Cathy Ashby noted that her organization lacked young donors. Knowing that demographic would be integral to growing the organization and increasing its revenue, she sought to remedy this shortcoming.

The organization she was working to change had a long record of success. Founded in 1956, the United Way of Abilene serves 19 counties in West Central Texas and works with 27 partner agencies. Focusing on the building blocks of life—education, income, and health—it seeks to collaborate with the community to create lasting change.

The residents of the community it serves love their city and want to serve. In fact, the city of approximately 100,000 supports more than 600 nonprofits, meaning residents have plenty of opportunities to engage and serve. Young people, in particular, have responded, and Ashby wants them to see the United Way as a leading opportunity for service.

To achieve this, she and her board took a number of steps.

First, Ashby recognized that younger people like to be engaged in different ways, so she recruited more board members capable of connecting with the 20-to-40 age group. She also acknowledged that younger generations want to connect to mission, actively serve the community, and still accommodate a full personal and work life. As such, her organization seeks to respect board members' individuality, taking the time to get to know each board member and align organizational opportunities with his or her individual interests. In addition, Ashby and her board work to continuously engage new and younger board members.

Also, the United Way of Abilene has intentionally linked its board to the Young Leaders Society, a committee for community leaders 40 and younger, by placing the chair of the Society on the board's executive committee. This gives the young members of the Society a voice and creates a connection to young up-and-coming leaders.

The result? Today, 21 of the board's 30 members are in their 30s or 40s.

But this process goes beyond board recruitment. The United Way of Abilene also ensures that younger board members have meaningful board experiences.

New board members are matched with mentor members for their first year. With expectations as simple as sitting together at meetings (to ensure attendance and answer questions), these pairings help newer, younger members understand the board culture.

In addition, every board member is required to serve on the Community Impact Review Team, an allocation committee known as CIRT. This entails evaluating organizations seeking funding, reviewing partner organizations, and conducting site visits that culminate in final recommendations on grant funding, all of which puts board members on the front lines of the work being done in partner organizations and gives them first-hand exposure to the mission of the United Way of Abilene.

CIRT is also used as an effective recruitment tool for younger board members because, as a committee open to non-board members, it allows the United Way of Abilene to meet and work with individuals who might be a good fit for the board in the future.

The focus on the individual extends beyond recruitment. Board members spend time learning about each other, and each board member is empowered to do what he or she is most interested in to make a difference. These passions are identified in interviews between individual board members and Ashby, who talks with each board member about what he or she is good at and would like to do.

In addition, individual achievements are recognized: If someone is honored in the community, he or she will be celebrated in a board meeting, where "member spotlights" highlight board members' accomplishments.

To ensure all board members remain connected to partners' missions, each year, United Way of Abilene has an annual full-day board retreat during which partner organizations are reviewed and site visits are conducted.

The result of this intentional pursuit of younger members and ongoing support of members is a board that is strong and well-equipped to serve the needs of the community its members so cherish."

- Ruth McCambridge is Editor in Chief of the Nonprofit Quarterly. Her background includes forty-five years of experience in nonprofits, primarily in organizations that mix grassroots community work with policy change. Beginning in the mid-1980s, Ruth spent a decade at the Boston Foundation, developing and implementing capacity building programs and advocating for grantmaking attention to constituent involvement.