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Get on Board: Make the Most of Your Experience as a Director

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You may be flattered when a nominating committee calls you about being elected or appointed to a board of directors. Sure, you've been on many boards. But are you a good board member? Have you truly contributed to the mission of the nonprofit(s) on whose boards you've served? Or, are you a nightmare for board chairs and chief staff executives?

Here are a few tips to help you be an effective board participant. Some of these can be found in handbooks about boards. And some are the unwritten lessons gleaned from my work with nonprofit CEOs and board chairs over the last 20 years -- the tips they want to tell you but don't. Following these can keep you from being the kind of board member that keeps nonprofit leaders up at night. Hopefully, these tips can help you provide the critical leadership most needed by our non-profits and communities.

What To Do

1. *Understand the responsibilities of a nonprofit governing board.* Board service is more than the old saw about "wealth, wisdom, or work."
2. *Ask questions before you agree to serve on the board.* What are the major issues the organization is facing? How can you help? Why are they interested in you? What is expected of the board as a whole and of each board member? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the board when dealing with tough issues and working with staff? How and

how often does the board evaluate its own performance, the chief executive's performance, and the organization's impact? In what stage is the nonprofit in its own development? Do the roles and responsibilities of the board fit what it should be doing at this stage in the nonprofit's life cycle?

3. *Before you agree to serve, communicate clearly what you can and cannot offer the organization.* If you can't give and raise financial support for the group, say so. (You should probably decline to serve if you aren't willing to do both of these, at least at modest levels.)
4. *If you decide to serve, attend the orientation and read the materials.* As former Raleigh Mayor Smedes York says, "Half of leadership is just showing up. The other half is reading the minutes."
5. *Ask questions at board meetings.* The only dumb question is the one you wanted to ask but didn't. As the board makes decisions, be sure you understand the history and context of an issue enough to exercise good judgment. If you don't understand the financial information, say so. Be sure you know the differences between for-profit and nonprofit accounting.
6. *If you don't see the board evaluating itself, the organization's outcomes, and the chief executive at least annually, volunteer to help establish and implement good practices for all three of these key board responsibilities.*
7. *Know the salary ranges for staff and the policies for setting them.* You'll probably only directly review the actual salary for the chief staff executive. Be sure all salary ranges reflect the education, experience, and responsibility levels required in the positions. Be sure both the salaries and benefits package are adequate for adults who may have families to support and mortgages and college tuition to pay. Inadequately compensated employees often can't afford to stay long, and high turnover is more expensive than low pay. It is unwise--if not unethical--if a nonprofit doesn't pay its own staff enough to support

their families. Just like businesses, nonprofits must do their part to be responsible employers in the community.

8. *Be ready to describe the nonprofit's mission in the check-out line at the grocery store.*
9. *Do what you say you'll do.* I hear regularly from nonprofit executives who resent spending their valuable time contacting (or cleaning up behind) their own board members who don't follow through.
10. *Say something kind to staff on a regular basis.* Too many board members treat staff like faceless, menial workers and begin most of their sentences with "You should. . . ."
11. *Use your senses of humor and celebration.* Nonprofit work is serious business, but putting the fun in activities like *fundraising* is a gift. Celebrate the accomplishments and milestones in the nonprofit's development.

What Not To Do

1. *Don't join a board because it looks good on your resumé or just because you're interested in the issue.* While commitment to the mission is a prerequisite for board service, a governing board deals mostly with organizational issues--goals, budgets, planning, etc.--rather than the direct content of the nonprofit's work. If you're interested in working directly with children, be a service volunteer rather than a board member.
2. *Don't confuse your roles.* If you also serve as a volunteer in the group's programs, remember this is different from your board hat. As a service volunteer, you're directly accountable to a staff member or another volunteer.
3. *Don't try to manage the organization.* One of board members' greatest sins is going beyond their governance and policy role-- meddling in management responsibilities. The board of a new group or one without paid staff often does some administrative work as well, but remember you're wearing a volunteer hat--not a board hat--in this case.

4. *Don't get involved in personnel matters regarding staff other than the chief staff executive unless you do so as a member of a formal grievance committee of the board --and then only if the grievance committee has followed all required procedures.*
5. *Don't assume that leading or managing a nonprofit is the same as managing a for-profit corporation, a government agency, or a college program.* Non-profits are significantly different in many issues related to their stake-holders, clients or constituents, accounting, law, communications, marketing, governance, accountability, resources, and bottom line. For example, nonprofit stake-holders typically are a complex matrix of the people served, volunteers, staff, board members, individual donors, foundation and corporate funders, elected officials, government agency regulators (local, state, and federal), the local community, the media, and all taxpayers (because of the tax-exempt status).
6. *Don't assume you're an expert your first year on the board. Listen and learn first.*
7. *Don't stay on the board if you can't attend most meetings.* The days of "name only" boards are over. A non-profit dealing with critical social issues cannot afford someone taking up a board seat who's not giving thought, commitment, and time.
8. *Don't serve on more boards than you can handle responsibly.* If you're on more than 3-5 governing boards, you're either a full-time volunteer or you need to resign from some. The standard of "due diligence" for board members means you show up, do your homework, and focus your energy on that organization. In addition to potential legal liability from poor attendance or inattention to the board's financial responsibilities and others, you risk losing two of your most important assets--the respect you have for yourself and the respect others have for you.

Serving effectively on a nonprofit board can be one of the biggest challenges to your leadership skills. Serving wisely is a fine art and a true privilege. Being a board member or trustee means you hold the trust of an organization and the public in your hands. Hold them with awe and care.



Photo by Jon Klein of the Low Income Housing Fund

Responsibilities of the Board as a Whole

- Determine the mission and goals.
- Select the chief staff executive, support the executive, and evaluate his or her performance annually.
- Ensure effective organizational planning.
- Ensure adequate resources to accomplish the organization's mission and goals.
- Ensure effective management of resources.
- Monitor the quality of the organization's public image.

Responsibilities of Each Board Member

- Attend all board meetings.
- Make a personal contribution. The fact that each board member gives is more important than the amount.

- In coordination with the staff and board, help with fundraising contacts with foundations, corporations, individual donors, and other funding sources
- In coordination with the chief executive, represent the organization to your constituencies and in your community.
- If the organization has members, recruit new members.

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