

Board Service

More jobs than people, more work than money, more rewarding than you ever imagined. That's what serving on a nonprofit Board is all about. The nonprofit world is a great place to put your volunteer time. Many of us in the community do it daily - and probably for more than one agency. And these volunteer commitments are designed to fit nicely into our lives - happy volunteers work hard and donate to the cause. But there are some jobs that go begging. Especially Board membership. Every nonprofit is run by a very visible Executive Director, who is hired and advised by a volunteer Board of Directors. It is not the Exec who is responsible for fund raising, it is the Board of Directors. It is not the Exec who sets policy, it is the Board of Directors. It is not the Exec who sets the agency direction, it is the Board of Directors.

Although the nonprofit Boards in our community manage agencies of different sizes and different mission, there is a common thread of responsibility and operation that governs each one. To be asked to serve on a nonprofit Board should be viewed as a serious request from people committed to an agency and mission. One should give equally serious consideration to what acceptance of this appointment means. Those who serve on non profit Boards should, must, understand the responsibilities and expectations of such service.

To begin with, a person is asked to consider Board membership because there has been a demonstrated interest in the agency - volunteer support at a committed level or response to fund raising requests. But fair consideration of the Board invitation should encourage some further investigation of the mission and agency goals, including some detailed look into business organization and program operations. Ideally, a request to consider Board membership should be accompanied by an invitation to a pre-orientation that includes a visit with the Exec and Board member to give an overview of the agency and some idea of the role one would play as a new Board member. After a person is accepted as a Board member there should be a more detailed orientation about the agency and its operations.

A Board Nominating Committee is looking for many characteristics for new members. There is the constant need to be developing Board leadership for the future. In fact, in my opinion, stay away from Boards with no term limits in their by-laws. This may be a Board that is really a mini dictatorship and may be stuck in first gear. Agencies shouldn't be surviving on someone's personality. A strong, well-built agency only becomes stronger as new leadership develops.

And what are the expectations of a new Board member? First, attend meetings!! Don't say, "yes." and then be a no-show. And accept committee membership. Each Board member, especially in a small agency, must take responsibility for management activity. Let me explain. Board members, often through committee work, help develop the agency budget, select agency and staff insurance offerings, support the exec with developing personnel policy, develop additional policies, and work on fund raising campaigns. Of course, each of these responsibilities takes time, effort and skill. That's why an invitation for membership is a serious request.

A good Board member also has an appreciation of two important issues, confidentiality and conflict of interest. Operations of the Board and agency should not be cocktail party conversation. Board members should always be willing to answer questions about the agency, but this should be done in a positive manner, no one needs to know about any brewing scandal or petty Board infighting. The other issue, conflict of interest, is often more of perception than fact - but perception is as important as fact and often develops a life of its own. It is up to the Board to define where the line is on conflict of interest. Many Boards have developed guidelines and ask members to read and sign a conflict of interest statement as well as a confidentiality statement at the beginning of the term of Board membership or at the beginning of a new fiscal year.

The biggest responsibility of a Board member, after “being there,” is money. Be a donor, be an asker, be a schmoozer at fund raising events. There is no other job, so difficult to many of us than asking for money - but it is the way of the nonprofit world. The mission drives the agency and money makes the agency thrive. Just remember, the board is responsible for the viability of the organization and its programs, the planning and direction of the agency and the funding of all of the above.

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