

Look Before Leaping to a Board Position

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Have you been asked to serve on a board of directors?

Did you feel honored? Maybe thinking about how good it would look on your resume?

Were you “pretty sure” that you would have enough time in your schedule to devote to the job?

These are all natural reactions, but there is more that you need to consider before jumping in and saying yes. Board service is serious work and there could be a lot more to the position than you may initially realize.

As a recent Board member who was given the ultimate responsibility of closing the doors of a non-profit library cooperative after the executive director stepped down, I discovered that while I thought I knew a lot about the organization, in reality, I knew very little. Before I joined the board and during the early days of my tenure, I should have asked more questions, inserted myself into the culture of the organization more effectively, and cultivated a better understanding of the responsibilities of the directors. One thing that I wish I had known earlier is the reality that, in our profession, we easily mix friendship and business but when you walk into a room for business, socializing and friendship should be left at the door. The responsibility of an appointed or elected board member is to represent the constituents of the organization: the primary purpose of board service should not be for personal gain.

If you have been asked to run for an office, serve on a board of directors, or join a key committee, what do you need to know to make a decision about accepting?

Here is some advice for those who are considering serving or who have been newly elected or appointed to a board or other governing body:

Understanding your responsibilities

If you put your name on a ballot or you are asked to fill a vacancy on a board, you are making a commitment of your time, energy and dedication to the organization¹. You've agreed to take part in the informed decision-making of the board. You have pledged to actively participate in making sure the organization reaches the goals outlined in the strategic plan and that the strategic plan is reviewed and updated regularly. You are one of a handful of people who have been elected to

represent the constituents in making sure the organization adheres to its by-laws and is fiscally responsible. You may even be accountable for evaluating the executive director's job performance²³.

The responsibilities of the Board member are to attend every board meeting, when possible represent your organization at other meetings, and attend events and functions related to the organization. You must become familiar with the purpose, mission and strategic plan of the organization, its overall financial structure and its culture⁴. You need to become mission extrinsic. You need to make sure the organization is keeping up with the latest trends and innovations⁵. You need to review the website, emails and latest announcements before each meeting. You should visit with your constituents either by phone or by email, making sure that their needs are being met. It is necessary to come prepared to actively participate at every meeting. This will likely take more time than you originally think.

Preparing and getting oriented

Before agreeing to run for the board, meet with other board members to gain their perspective on the responsibilities and commitment of joining the board. Ask them about the cultural climate and how they view the board. Visit with the executive director and other key members of the organization to discuss issues, find out what their short- and long-term goals are, and get an accurate sense of the commitment to change and process toward the latest trends and innovation in the field⁶. Email or meet with fellow constituents about their perspectives of the organization. Find out if there are training opportunities for new board members⁷. Gain as much perspective as you can before accepting the role as a Board member.

As the “new kid on the block,” you have a narrow window of time (the honeymoon) to ask questions and to seek answers – a window that will close once you are considered a seasoned board member. At your first Board meeting, ask a lot of questions. Do not shy away from speaking your mind. Don't be stopped by the words, “It's always been done that way.” The way it has been done in the past may not be valid anymore but if it is, you need to understand why. It's a reasonable request. Seek out as many learning opportunities and ask as many questions as possible. Be aware that seasoned board members may use the opportunity of having a “new kid” to institute change or to strike up a necessary conversation that was once dead.

Accepting fiscal responsibility

As a board member, one of your jobs is to understand the fiscal management of an organization⁸. Before accepting a position on the board, ask to look at the budget. Ask questions of the executive director and/or the accountant about the finances of the organization. Find out if the organization relies on grant funding along with the percentage of grants that have been awarded. Ask how the board is involved in making decisions about fiscal responsibilities toward the organization⁹. Are reviews and approvals of long term commitments such as hiring/firing, maintenance contracts, and leasing equipment or space the responsibility of the board? Finally, be sure the organization has directors and officers (D&O) liability insurance to cover the board members and the organization in the event of a lawsuit or potential lawsuit¹⁰.

Gathering information

Ask plenty of questions and, if you're not satisfied with the answers, keep pressing for more. Ask questions of fellow board members, the executive director and other key officers of the organization. Do not be mollified with the simple answers, but dig deep for complete information. Ask the tough questions. If you are on friendly terms with the executive director or with fellow board members, make sure you differentiate between friendship and the responsibilities of being a board member in your question and answer conversations. Do not be afraid to cause friction by asking questions that need to be addressed or to have a discussion on a certain topic or sensitive issues. Be courteous and respectful of other board members and do not assign blame on past or current board members or even the executive director. Your goal is knowledge, not fault finding. When asking questions and considering the answers, step back and look the big picture. Be as objective as you possibly can. Remember that serving on a board means taking action on behalf of your constituents. If you are quiet and only observe, you are not representing your constituents fairly.

Looking at the officers and other board members

If you are asked to serve immediately as president, vice-president, secretary or treasurer or member-at-large, find out why those positions are not being filled by an existing board member. Well-run boards should have a succession plan so that new board members are not asked to accept leadership positions for which they may not be ready. If there seems to be a disproportionate number of vacancies on the board, ask about that as well. There could be a valid reason, such as term limits or it could be an indicator of problems you should know about. Read the minutes from the previous meetings to understand the dynamics of the group. If you are considering an officer or other specific position, contact the person who previously held the position and ask them about the duties and responsibilities of the office. When you know the details, decide if you have the time, energy and dedication to hold the position. For example, as treasurer, you must have a clear understanding of the organization's financial history, be willing to sign and write checks, and to review the budget on a regular basis. As president, you must work closely with the executive director to plan the meeting agendas, make sure the wishes of the board are followed and run the meetings effectively and efficiently. The vice-president must be willing and able to step into the position of president at any given time and with little notice. Officers have the power to write the minutes the way that they perceive the meeting. As a member-at-large, you are responsible for attending the meetings on a regular basis. Bring your reasoned opinions and your impartial viewpoint as a board member and a constituent of the organization.

Communicating

Board members, especially those who are also officers, need to make sure that their voices are heard through minutes which can be disseminated through email, blogs, websites, snail mail and listservs to the constituents¹¹. Make sure that constituents are aware of what is happening within the organization and the board. Constituents should never be surprised by an action the board takes. Also, make sure that the executive director keeps the board informed of the latest

trends in the field or industry, all activities of the organization, and any proposed or actual legislative changes that could impact the organization¹².

Ensuring accountability

The executive director is accountable to the board. The board is accountable to its constituents. Before accepting or running for a position on the board, find out how the chain of command works and how accountable each staff position is to the board. Find out how responsive existing board members and the executive director are to critiques and if those individuals consistently follow up on action items or recommendations by the board. Ask questions about how the executive director is reviewed and evaluated and find out what the current board's opinion is of that person's job performance¹³.

Becoming a board member can be a rewarding experience. It allows you to expand your knowledge of the inner workings of an organization and provides an opportunity to be of service to a cause that's important to you. It can also be a daunting experience when a large amount of responsibility and accountability are placed on your shoulders, especially if you weren't expecting that. Before accepting the job (and make no mistake, it's a job – even though you are not compensated in dollars), be sure you have the time and energy to deliver on your commitment. And always remember that you are an ambassador for the organization and your actions - or lack of actions - speak volumes.

If the board of the cooperative on which I served had come together and asked the hard questions and made some difficult, tough decisions over several years instead of waiting until the last few months of operation, the cooperative may not have closed its doors permanently. If I had known then what I know now, the organization may have been able to reinvent itself and continued to support the librarians and library staff with the necessary tools, training, networking and support to continue serving their communities.

Serving on boards can be immensely challenging and rewarding. The more you know from the start, the less challenging and more rewarding it will be.

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