



WHAT ORGANIZATIONS NEED FROM BOARD MEMBERS

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Different nonprofits will have different expectations of board members based on their size, mission, or particular challenges. Understanding what an organization needs will help you match your motives, interests, time commitments, and personal goals to that organization so that you can make a valuable contribution.

Foundations

Grantmaking foundations are in the enviable position of giving away money. A foundation board approves all grants that are awarded to public charities. In small foundations, you may actually read all the applications. Board members are not expected to raise funds.

Advocacy groups

You might join the board of an advocacy organization because its cause is your passion. You'll need good political instincts and lobbying skills because raising awareness for your issue and helping get bills passed are important ways of being involved.

Professional associations

You need to be active and visible in your profession because board members usually are elected by the entire membership. Serving on an association board tends to be a badge of accomplishment.

All-volunteer organizations (AVOs)

If you join a board in this type of organization, be prepared to work hard. There is no professional staff, so board members wear several hats and keep the wheels turning while providing governance oversight. You need to be a team player who understands which hat to wear when. You must understand when to act alone and when to make decisions as a group.

Arts and cultural organizations

It is often considered prestigious to serve on the board of a museum or performing arts institution. Board members are expected to give generously and be active fundraisers. While the opportunity to attend performances and events may make board positions appealing, these institutions also want active board members who are passionate about the mission.

Hospitals

When considering the board of a nonprofit hospital, it's important to become familiar with relevant IRS and other legal regulations such as providing community benefit and keeping patient records confidential. When a hospital is part of a health system, you must be aware of the hospital board's relationship to the system's board. If you follow the health-care reform debate, you'll begin to understand the big issues hospital board members face.

Colleges and universities

Higher education boards govern institutions with complex structures while being mindful of the importance of educational quality. Board members deal with the intertwined needs of university, faculty, administration, and students. Private and public governance structures and responsibilities differ somewhat.

Alumni associations

If you are considering serving on an alumni association board, you should know that fundraising is its primary purpose. Board service will also give you an opportunity to stay in touch with college faculty and friends while showing gratitude to the institution that prepared you for your professional life.

Supporting organizations

Most supporting organizations are fundraising bodies for the parent organization; an example is a foundation associated with a public university system. Fundraising should be something you enjoy. All your efforts will need to be coordinated with the parent nonprofit, which means that the board alone cannot determine which programs to support.

Chapters of federated organizations

Chapter boards usually oversee field activities in their local communities, while the national board sets overall direction. As a chapter board member, you will need to follow instructions from headquarters, and you must accept that part of your board's fundraising results will likely be shared with the national organization.

International, national, regional, or local organizations

Board composition and selection may be different depending on the organization's scope and reach. You'll need familiarity

with the issues, whether they are high-profile global questions or local issues that result in heated discussions. It might be wise to begin with a local organization and then expand your reach as you gain experience.

Big budget or small budget organizations

Budget size, like mission scope, often indicates the complexity of issues board members will address, but recent economic conditions have added a layer of budgetary problems for the majority of nonprofits. Your involvement as a strategic leader or a hands-on member may relate to budget size. The more complicated the financial situation, the more familiar you need to be with nonprofit finance and accounting principles.

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