



# Getting ON Board

Discover what you need to know before taking your seat at the boardroom table.

BY WILFORD A. BUTLER, CAE

YOU MUST BE GENUINELY INTERESTED in being helpful and responsive as a director or trustee; otherwise you would not have allowed your name to be placed in nomination. That said, it's important that you understand the enormous responsibilities placed upon today's board members. In addition to the growing cynicism over organizational ethics and procedures—which

has fueled a maelstrom of public scrutiny and potential liability, placing board members in a less-than-desirable position—the mountain of information you'll be asked to digest and the amount of time you'll be expected to dedicate can be overwhelming.



However, Berit Lakey, a senior consultant at BoardSource, Washington, D.C., points out, "It's essential to realize that while you're taking on a big responsibility, there are also some wonderful things to gain, namely personal and professional growth. What you don't gain," she's quick to add, "is any more free time."

Still interested? This checklist for the fledgling director should help you get started.

As a new director, you must do the following:

- **Realize that you are responsible for the future of the organization** and, in most cases, must represent the best interests of all members.
- **Understand the sources and uses of revenue** by always having the most recent audited financial statements, current budget, and monthly financial reports.
- **Know how the organization is structured.** Use the articles, bylaws, and other documents of incorporation as your guide.
- **Hold copies of the most recent federal and state filings** as well as the documents indicating the organization's good standing with the state of incorporation.
- **Inquire about any pending legal actions** against the organization. If you have not been briefed on them or have otherwise failed to secure such information *before* permitting your name to be placed in nomination, it's important to get this information as soon as possible.
- **Get a summary of the types of insurance** in place for the organization, especially directors and officers liability insurance.
- **Pinpoint how much of your time board activities will consume.** Ask for a schedule of board meetings, and make certain that you can organize your time accordingly. Find out

what other responsibilities you are expected to shoulder. For example, are you expected to chair a committee or activity? Are you expected to donate at a certain level or raise a certain amount in contributions?

- **Acknowledge the organization's designated spokesperson.** Refer inquiries to the appropriate staff or volunteer leader.
- **Be familiar with the organization's history,** mission, major projects, and key activities and events.
- **Clear any requests for public appearances** with the organization's staff.
- **Understand the protocol for financial reimbursements** before spending organizational funds. And, when spending the organization's dollars, do so far more conservatively than when you are spending your own money.

- **Take initiative.** Best-practice organizations have clear, precise mission statements, a vision of the future, and strategic short-term and long-range goals. If your organization does not have all of these lodestars, take the necessary action to put them in place, as they will save time and other resources and will push the organization in the desired direction.
- **Work cooperatively with staff** to contribute to board reports and other projects.
- **Know when to say when.** At the end of your first year, evaluate your contributions to determine whether you have made a significant impact on the organization for which you volunteer. If not, or if you feel the opportunity for progress is limited, consider making an early exit.
- **Protect yourself.** If, as a freshman director, you have expressed your

objections at the board table to a course of action that you believe is harmful to the organization, and there appears to be no change in that direction, immediately remove yourself from the board.

- **Set boundaries.** Board leadership and other volunteer work should not interfere with your primary employment. Instead, it should afford you the opportunity to experience and consider the process of voluntary organizations while accomplishing good works on behalf of your organization.

Board service is a privilege, not a career requirement, and, managed correctly, will benefit the individual, the organization, and the community. **AM**

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