

Are you ready to be a Board Volunteer?

By Michelle Martinez

You're at a party, mixing and mingling with friends, and someone happens to mention that they volunteer with the board of a charity. You've heard that this is a good way to beef up your resume, perhaps acquire some new skills and network (and of course give something back to the community) so you ask a few more questions about what might be involved. Your friend waxes lyrical about the experience and before you know it, you are invited to the next meeting and voila! You're on a board!

After a few meetings, however, you find yourself regretting your hasty decision. You're not really sure what you're supposed to be doing and the agency seems to expect you to fundraise as well. You wonder how you can extract yourself from the situation gracefully. You just stop showing up.

For many new to board service, this is not an unfamiliar story. However, you can avoid some of this angst if you are prepared to do a bit of candid self-reflection up front. Here are a few questions to get you started:

1) Why do I want to be on a board?

Carefully contemplate your motivations for getting involved in this specialized area of volunteer activity. Is it to give back to your community? Is it to acquire new skills? Is it to broaden your sphere of contacts? Is it to gain respect of peers? Is it to gain Canadian experience for your resume? Is it because you think it might be 'easier' than volunteering on the front lines at a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter or with teenage moms? Be honest with yourself. All reasons are valid. It is okay to expect to learn and grow from your volunteering. It is okay to recognize your comfort zones and start off within them. But also recognize that a certain amount of community spirit is expected from any volunteer. Without it, you will become disengaged and quickly lose interest in board service.

2) Am I really ready to make a commitment to a board?

Depending on the type of board you join, you may be asked to do more than just attend and actively participate in monthly board meetings. You may also be asked participate in various special events during the year or work on special projects. Also be aware that board terms can vary from anywhere from 1 to 5 years. With all the demands of work and family life, it may be a challenge carving out space for your volunteer board work. Are you ready to make this long-term commitment? If not, you can opt to serve on a committee. There may be more hours involved in the short term but this is also a great way to 'test drive' an organization before you decide if you want to commit to a 3 year term.

3) Do I have what it takes to contribute effectively to the board?

As someone new to board volunteerism, you need to be aware of the roles and responsibilities of board directors. There are numerous resources available which will provide you with a basic orientation to board service. (Check out www.boardmatch.org or visit your local United Way). However, once you have decided on the organization you want to volunteer with, you also need to understand quite clearly what their expectations are of you and whether or not you can live up to them. Do you really have the skills this organization needs? And, just as importantly, are you prepared to contribute them? For example, maybe you do marketing in your day job and are looking for a change. But marketing know-how is what this charity needs right now. Are you prepared to set aside your desire for a change for the time being to contribute what is needed?

Do you have some of the characteristics of a good board member?
Are you flexible, willing to accept constructive criticism, able to communicate with others with respect? Do you work well in a situation where you may have to share power with others and make decisions by consensus? Can you accept alternative viewpoints with an open-mind? Will you be comfortable working with others from diverse socio-economic and ethno-cultural groups?



4) What causes do I truly care about?

Before you join just any non-profit board, think carefully about what causes you are passionate about. Not just mildly concerned over but deeply outraged by, profoundly saddened by, personally connected to. Also, take some time to test your passion by rolling your sleeves up and volunteering on the front lines. Get a feel for the organization you think you might be interested in by talking to the staff, current volunteers, and the individuals that the agency serves. There is no shortage of worthy causes out there, but what will keep bringing you back to the board table month after month is an issue that energizes you to your core. It is this passion that will help you set time aside to do just that little bit extra to make a lasting difference.

In a recently published Statistics Canada report, Cornerstone of Community, more than half of the non-profit organizations surveyed identified obtaining board members as one of their on-going challenges. I would venture to say that not just any board member will do. As non-profit organizations try to do more and more with less and less, they can ill-afford the cost of a revolving door boardroom. Skilled, committed, dedicated, passionate, board volunteers are needed throughout our sector. Reflecting on some of the questions outlined above will certainly increase the odds that your board volunteer experience will be a positive one for you and the agency of your choice.

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