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What It Means To Be A Nonprofit Board Member



By Mindy Wolfle

Since I began networking over 20 years ago, I have found the best way to connect with compatible people was to become involved in not-for-profit organizations. These have included professional associations, business groups, charitable organizations and others in the not-for-profit world. The likely progression of being involved in one such group is to become a member of the board of directors or trustees. With these positions come great responsibilities and rewards.

From my own experiences, board involvement runs the gamut from exhilaration at the close of a successful fundraising event to utter frustration when a board cannot reach consensus on an important matter. Let's face it: we're all humans, with our own agendas, biases, expertise, people skills and levels of

patience. Me: not so patient.

There are many reasons why people join boards. At the top of this list is that they are asked to help make a difference in an organization by lending their leadership and other skills. I remember well when the late Paula Atlas asked me to join the board of directors of the Long Island Association for Business & Professional Women in the late 1990s. I truly was honored to be among a group of highly competent, professional women who helped pave the way for others like me. This was early in my business career, having left government after an 18 year stint.

Other potential board members are dedicated to a cause and find that a role on the board is the best way to carry out that dedication. And there are some individuals who are ego-driven; it looks good on their LinkedIn page and within the circles that they travel. I do believe that this type is in the minority. Seeing firsthand how hard board members work

— and for no pay — it takes a unique person to give it his or her all for the betterment of a not-for-profit group.

Michele Pincus, a partner in the Uniondale law firm Sahn Ward Coschignano, said boards “are the heart of not-for profit-organizations. My service on boards has allowed me to develop personal relationships with other board members that I would not have cultivated just by attending meetings. These relationships have allowed me to work with like-minded people, as well as serve the basis for future business referrals.” A former board president, Michele adds, “A good leader will select members who are willing to work for the benefit of the organization and lead committees with other enthusiastic members who are eager to further the mission of the organization.”

Vivian Leber, principal of Business Writing Source, has served on a number of boards and committees. “It can be an adventure to join a

board,” said said. “Your role may evolve in unexpected ways and the experience may immeasurably expand your skills and spark new interests, as happened for me. If the person inviting you to join tries to minimize the time commitment, beware! Figure it will be double or triple, especially if you are the type who gives 100 percent. Before agreeing to join, try to sit in as a guest at a board meeting, mainly to get a feel for the board's culture and to learn whether its members are truly mission-driven.” Good advice, indeed.

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