

7 of the Most Important Things to Consider Before Joining the Board of a Non-Profit

Whether it is joining the board of your local church, an international relief organization, or your child's soccer league, you want to join the board of an organization whose mission you find to be meaningful and where you believe you can make a contribution. But such a connection doesn't just happen. To save yourself and the nonprofit from a bad match consider taking a few steps before committing to join a board.

1. Meet with the organization's senior leader (sometimes referred to as the executive director or chief executive officer). The CEO's effectiveness is essential to the organization's success, so getting a sense for the CEO, their values, and how they operate is important. Likewise, find out who is chairing the board, how they regard their role as chair, and what they see as the role of the board. Try to get a sense of the rapport between the chair and the CEO. See who serves in the other officer positions. And ask if there is a plan for leadership succession.

Keep in mind, the Chair and CEO likely will have some say in who is selected for the board, so meeting each is an opportunity for you to establish rapport and observing is an opportunity to learn something about the quality of rapport.

2. *Understand the work of the organization and how it assesses its effectiveness. Become familiar with the programs offered and observe the staff in action where you can.*
3. Review the organizations financial statements to find out the size of the budget, revenue sources, and how the funds are spent. Find out the size of the organization's cash reserve. If the cash reserve is close to the edge, find out how it is being monitored. Also check if there is an endowment, whether the organization is cutting into it, and the implications and long-term plan related to the endowment.
4. *Review the list of board members and their backgrounds to find out the caliber and diversity of experience and backgrounds. Find out the extent to which they are contributing financially and otherwise. This will also help you understand if you have something to add that others might not bring to the table and the likelihood of your being a good fit for the current board.*
5. Ask what will be expected of you as a board member, in terms of attendance at board meetings, participation on committees, financial contributions, fundraising, and anything else.

6. *Ask for and read the following items: the organization's bylaws, most recent audit and management letter, current budget, strategic plan if there is one, and organizational materials.*
7. Google the organization to see if there were any past problems, or inquire of the Board. If you find none, great. If you find something and no one offers to meet with you to fill you in on things be wary. The organization should be willing to discretely lay out the entire situation and all of the documentation. Inquire about board protections and liability insurance.

By learning about the organization before you make a decision about joining the board, you will have a better idea of what will be expected of you and how you may be able to help the organization further its mission.

Find some challenges? Don't let them necessarily scare you off. That may be exactly why they need you. If you can make a contribution that helps advance the cause your sense of reward and satisfaction will only be increased. The key is to go into the situation with as much foreknowledge as possible.

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