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Serving on a Nonprofit Board: Putting Yourself in Their Shoes

When you work in our firm, you are encouraged not only to contribute by engaging in pro bono activities - but you are also encouraged to offer your experience and wisdom to non-profit boards. It's not only a great way to serve the community, but it's also a valuable way to better understand what it's like to serve on a public or private company board.

If you're relatively young and working in-house, you might think you don't have anything to offer a non-profit board - but nothing could be further from the truth. Even a rudimentary understanding of corporate governance issues often is light years ahead of others that serve on non-profit boards. Plus, lawyers are trained to be objective and not to be intimidated by complexity. These are two key traits for a successful director!

Plus you will inevitably fit in because non-profit board service truly is a volunteer enterprise - you'll find that non-profit boards contain a wide array of diverse backgrounds and interests.

Here are a half-dozen things to consider as you choose a first board:

1. **Which non-profit board should I join?** - Follow your passion. Don't select a non-profit board seat just because it might look good on your resume. Or just because it fits your career goals. The non-profit's mission should be something for which you have a keen interest.

How do you identify an interest? It might help to think of non-profit service as falling into four principal sectors:

- Education
- Social Studies
- Arts
- Health Care

Once you've found a board that fits your interest - you'll find yourself learning things of interest to you even if it happens to be an otherwise less productive board meeting. And as I have learned from painful experience, volunteering on a board when you don't have that passion is almost worse than not serving at all.

Be aware that there are loosely two types of non-profit boards. One that is more of a fiduciary nature, where you help set the organization's strategy, where you hire and fire the executive director and evaluate and set that person's pay. You'll need to become accustomed to asking hard questions - but at the same time, being collegial so that the board still works as a team.

The other type is more of a fundraising nature. These also serve a real purpose as most non-profits need to raise money to fulfill their mission. But it won't give you quite as much of a feel for what it's like to serve as a public or private company director.

2. **What is the time commitment?** - This is an area where people often trip up. They aren't realistic about how busy they already are. Before you accept a board seat, you should know how much time each month you'll realistically be spending not only at board meetings but also reviewing board materials and other ancillary activities that come with serving as a board member (e.g., fundraising, social functions).

Once you find out what the expectations are - if they seem likely to work for you - just jump in. If you need to miss a meeting from time to time, your nonprofit board colleagues will understand. Everybody has a full-time job and is doing this to volunteer and help the community.

You should also nail down how long your board term is expected to be. You don't want to disrupt the composition of a board by leaving early. It takes time to orient a new director and your full value might not be unlocked until you've served for a year or more. You don't want to waste the limited resources of a non-profit's staff by getting trained and then leaving the board.

3. **What is the financial commitment?** - Your board should be very clear if they will be expecting you to make a material financial contribution. This is another reason to choose an organization that is close to your heart. It could be that your employer or friends will support this.

Choose a board that has financial expectations that would fit your charitable budget even if you have no outside support. Again, the Executive Director or board chair should be very upfront on what the expectations are before you agree to serve.

4. **What value do you bring to the table?** - In many cases, being a board candidate is like interviewing for a job. You need to persuade those that will be the primary decisionmakers that you have a skill set that the board needs.

It might be your knowledge. It might be your connections. It might be your bright smile. Find out what gaps the board currently has if you can - and see if what you bring to the table might help fill them. That's a big selling point.

5. **What achievements are you hoping to accomplish by participating on the board?** - It's funny but I imagine quite a few board candidates never consider this question. And it's an important one because as a board member, you'll have input into both the short- and long-term - strategy of an organization. What can be more important than that?

So, periodically ask yourself this question. Not just when you first join a board, but also as you get to better know the organization and the industry in which it operates. What would make you most proud by serving?

6. **Does the existing board seem like a group of good directors?** - Even as you are being interviewed for a board, you might have a chance to interview the board itself. You probably will meet 3 or 4 other directors.

Ask questions like: How much time they found board service takes? What makes them proud to serve on the board? What issues have they had in getting the information they want?

Test what you have previously heard about the expectations of serving on that board. If you have a series of engaging conversations, your "gut" will lead you to the right decision - and you will feel that much more prepared when you join the board. Have a great experience - and thanks for your service!

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