

“But What Should I Actually DO?”

An “On-the-Ground” Job Description for a Great Board Member

It’s easy enough to find a traditional job description for a nonprofit board member on the web. Sometimes they are structured around board members’ legal responsibilities (usually described as the “duty of care”, “duty of loyalty” and “duty of “obedience”); other times they recount the major functions of the board such as “steward the mission”, “select the Executive Director” and “ensure adequate resources and protect assets.” While it’s important for board members to understand their legal obligations, those job descriptions can leave new board members feeling like “huh?”, without a clear idea of what they should *personally* be doing to be a great board member. So what should board members actually spend their time doing if they want to be effective? Read on.. .

FIRST: Be truly passionate about the mission of your organization. Everything else will come easily after that.

STAY “IN THE KNOW”

1. Know why you are passionate about the organization, and be able to articulate it clearly.
2. Know everything you can about what the organization is doing. See the programs in action, hear the stories, meet the staff. And be able to tell those stories!
3. Be prepared. Read the board packet, pay attention at meetings, stay in the loop about what is going on.
4. Know what is going on in the community in your issue area, and what issues are facing non-profits more generally.

SHOW UP AND ENGAGE

1. Board work is team work. The occasional need to miss a meeting or call in is understandable, but you can’t really be part of the team if you aren’t there in person almost all the time.
2. Make friends with your teammates. Taking the time to make personal connections with other board members will pay off many times over in your ability to work well together and have fun doing it.

CONSIDER THE BIG PICTURE, AND SPEAK UP

1. Try to see the forest for the trees: keep your sights on where the organization is going and how it is changing with the current environment.
2. Ask questions at board meetings about what you don’t know, even if you are new. Guaranteed, other people at the table are wondering too.
3. Be willing to challenge “what everyone else thinks” and “the way we’ve always done it.” The boards that really soar are the ones where people are raising exciting, creative, challenging ideas at every meeting. The ones that you see in the news because they got into trouble are the boards where no one is asking the hard questions.

MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH THE REST OF THE WORLD

1. Talk up your organization, wherever you go! The answer to “How are you?” can be “I’m on a great board!”
2. Invite the people and groups you know to come learn about your organization, and bring information about your organization into the other parts of your life such as church, alumni groups, or wherever else you are connected.

GIVE LIKE YOU MEAN IT

In addition to being important to the bottom line, a “stretch gift” will make you feel proud of yourself and your involvement in this organization. It will show your commitment and make it easier to ask others to join you in investing. Don’t give til it hurts . . . give til it feels really good!

BE WILLING TO ASK

It’s your job as a board member to reach out to people and invite them into your organization. You might ask your circle of friends for expert advice, for volunteers, to join you at an event, and when the time is right, for money. Asking can be scary, but it helps to realize you are just inviting people to help change the world in a way you both care about, and they can always say no thanks.

FOLLOW THROUGH WHEN YOU COMMIT . . .

. . . or admit it and make a backup plan or ask for help if you can’t. Yes, this means even on those fundraising calls you are putting off! Board work only works if everyone does their part; not following through puts unfair strain on staff or other board members.

ASK YOURSELF, “IS THIS REALLY MY JOB AS A BOARD MEMBER?”

1. Determine if issues are “Where should we go?” or “How do we get there?” questions. If it is the latter, it is likely a staff call. Give input, but don’t micromanage.
2. Keep your “board member hat” for strategic discussions, being an ambassador, and other board-level work. But when you are acting as a hands-on volunteer you should be taking direction from the staff or board member who owns the project.
3. Be careful about making too many demands of staff. Of course ask them for what you need, but remember that they have important jobs that may make filling extra requests for help or information hard to take on in a timely way.