



THE “IDEAL” BOARD MEMBER

While there might not be anything that is “ideal” including an “ideal Board member”, wishes only have a chance of coming true when we begin to dream, to think about the ‘what ifs’ and to envision the possibilities.

The Need for the ‘Ideal’. Why even consider the issue of an ideal Board member? From a nonprofit’s perspective, it’s a matter of strategically determining what your ‘ideal’ Board member would look like, someone who embodies the multiple expectations and responsibilities of Board membership. And from the perspective of an individual, it’s a matter of determining how much you are willing to commit to an organization to meet both the needs of that organization as well as your ‘WIFM’ (what’s in it for me) issues.

12 ‘Ideal’ Characteristics. Consider what John Carver, a leading thinker in Board issues, has to say: “Serving on a poor Board is less like servant leadership and more like serving time.” To help you avoid the ‘serving time’ syndrome as well as prevent your organization from ‘imprisoning’ its Board members, I’ve assembled the following list of characteristics, in no special order.

1. *Commitment* – One must share the passion embodied in the cause’s mission as well as the future dreams as delineated in the organizational vision statement..
2. *Values* – Philosophical compatibility must exist between the beliefs and values of individual Board members and the organization. This does not mean you should not strive for cultural, ethnic and other measures of diversity within Board membership; but it does mean that regardless of one’s diversity, all share similar philosophical perspectives relative to the mission of the nonprofit organization.
3. *Resources* – This reflects the need for each member to willingly, generously and graciously support the nonprofit organization in all its fundraising efforts, based on one’s individual financial capacity and one’s network of community resources.
4. *Professional Talents* – One must have professional and / or personal skills and expertise needed to govern well and willingly offer these talents to serve the organization.
5. *Life Circumstances* – One’s present life circumstances allows for sustained commitment to the nonprofit organization on a regularly basis.

6. *Integrity* – One must always honor open and honest communications, disclosing issues that potentially raise the conflict of interest flag as well as knowing when to resign if unable to meet board commitments.
7. *Accountability* – Board members must willing accept responsibility for their actions.
8. *Moral Courage* – An ‘ideal’ Board member should have the courage of his or her convictions - to state one’s ideas, issues and concerns in an assertive manner to peers. This is particularly important when decision-making focuses on important issues with long-term consequences, even if it means going against the majority of Board members during the decision-making process.
9. *Loyalty* – Not withstanding moral courage, one must yield to the majority rule or consensus of the group and not “bad-mouth” decisions once agreed upon.
10. *Positive Attitude* – A Board member must have an ‘I can make a difference attitude’, believe s/he can contribute in a positive way and exude enthusiasm and excitement about the organization.
11. *Learning* – One must do ‘homework’ regarding the organization and the industry that it is in (healthcare, the arts, education, the environment, etc.), be willing to attend training sessions and retreats and, in general, commit to being part of a learning organization.
12. *Evaluation* – Important jobs demand an annual evaluation in order to assess strengths and challenges; each Board member must be willing to participate in an annual evaluation, both individually and as a group. Evaluation of the board enables the organization to better understand its strengths, opportunities and challenges in order to build capacity in advancing its mission.

Using “Ideal” Measures. As a prospective board member, how about whipping out this list and reviewing it with representatives of that nonprofit organization seeking to recruit you to their board, to ascertain if this is the right fit for you? As board or executive staff of a nonprofit organization, why not have the board develop a board member prospectus, which includes these ideals, and use it as a Board recruitment and training tool?

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