

The Fundamentals of Effective Board Involvement

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For Mentoring Canada

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Are you a new or prospective non-profit board member who is unsure of what you may be getting into? Are you a more experienced board member who doesn't feel that your board participation is all that it could be?

If so, welcome to The Fundamentals of Effective Board Involvement!

In **The Fundamentals of Effective Board Involvement** course, you will:

- Explore your objectives, roles, and responsibilities, and learn about effective board practices
- Find updated board information and an energy boost for board veterans
- Meet fellow "students", Carlos and Debra, and learn from their experiences
- Apply your knowledge to real situations.

By the end of this course, you will be prepared to demonstrate competent, passionate, accountable and ethical leadership in your organization.

You can take this course at your own pace, but to cover all subjects and activities from Module 1 through 5 should take about 2 to 3 hours of work.

To get the most out of this course, do all the activities ... this way, you can put into practice what you are learning. You may even want to share some of the materials and activities with the rest of your board, and work on them as a team.

Ready to make a difference in your organization? Then let's get started.

» Module 1 - Your Commitment to the Board

Your Commitment to the Board

Becoming a board member is a commitment. Before taking on or renewing this commitment, you need to ponder some key questions to ensure you can fulfill your pledge to the organization and meet your personal goals at the same time.



Before signing on as a new board member, there are a number of things you should consider, such as:

- Your motivations and goals for volunteering on this board
- The skills, knowledge, experience or other assets you have to offer the board
- What you know about the organization, and what you need to find out about the organization
- How well your objectives and assets match what the organization needs and has to offer.

Even seasoned board members should consider these issues periodically. As a board veteran, this will help ensure that your board involvement remains both beneficial to your organization and rewarding to you.

Whether you're enlisting as a first time board member, or you're a board veteran thinking about signing on for another term, determine if this is the right commitment for you.

What Motivates You?

So you want to be a board member ... Why?

Your answer to this question may be very simple - perhaps you were asked and just didn't know how to say no. Or it might be as profound as a deep sense of personal mission.



People come to boards of directors from many different backgrounds and get involved for a diversity of reasons. Your motivations and goals will influence your expectations and your effectiveness in carrying out your roles and responsibilities. Before you commit to the board, it is therefore important that you and the organization are aware of your motivations and objectives. This will ensure that your motives are compatible with the organization, and that the board can help you to fulfill your goals.

It is common for board members to join without a clear awareness of the goals and expectations they have for their involvement.

People often join boards for reasons such as these:

- To serve an important cause, a personal interest or a need of a family member or friend
- To fulfill a "civic duty" to contribute to the community good
- To give back to the community or the organization
- To fulfill a social need, such as a desire for friendship, recognition, status, visibility or affiliation
- To develop or apply specific knowledge, skills and experience
- To explore career interests
- To build a resume
- To find challenge or variety that does not exist in your paid employment
- To accomplish something that you cannot achieve alone
- To find personal fulfillment.

Your motivations give you and the organization clues as to the kinds of board assignments you will find most rewarding. For example, if one of your goals is to advance your social standing, then perhaps a highly visible position on the public relations committee would be appropriate. If you are hoping to gain knowledge and skills in non-profit finances, then you could sign up with the finance committee and perhaps eventually become the organization's treasurer.

Most people have more than one reason for becoming or remaining involved on a board of directors. While there are few "wrong" reasons for board participation, the best reasons usually involve a balance of altruism (like a desire to give back to the community) and personal or mutual benefit (like building leadership skills).

In examining your motivation, it is important not only to think about why you are volunteering on *a board*, but also to consider your reasons for volunteering with *this board*. Examine your impetus for volunteering with this cause *generally* and this organization *specifically*.

Your initial motivation for your board involvement is likely to change over time. Perhaps you originally got involved to offer your expertise in a particular field. Later, you might remain involved because you have developed a deep commitment to the cause, having witnessed the effectiveness of the organization's services. Given the evolving nature of your inspiration, it is important to reexamine your motivations and objectives over time, and express those to the

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organization. This will allow you and the organization to identify challenging and rewarding opportunities for you to continue to contribute.

To further examine your motivations for joining or staying on the board, next do the motivations and goals exercise.

Your Motives (Self-Exploration Exercise)

All board members have their own unique motivations that led them to volunteer on the board of directors, and that drive them to remain on the board. Knowing what your inspirations and objectives are, and sharing them with the organization, will help to ensure that you are given opportunities that maximize your contributions and your rewards.



The following questions are designed to help you to explore your motivations for volunteering as a board member. **Fill in your answers, and consider printing this page and sharing your answers** with your board President, Nominating Committee or Executive Director.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What interests you about serving on a board of directors?
2. Examine the examples of reasons people volunteer on a board outlined in What is motivating you? Which of these reasons applies most to you?
3. What motivated you to volunteer with this cause?
4. What attracted you to this organization in particular?
5. Why are you interested in volunteering on this board *now*?
6. Why are you interested in serving in this capacity rather than in other volunteer roles in this organization?
7. How do you think the organization or community will benefit from your participation on the board?
8. What personal benefits might you gain from your board involvement?

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9. If you are a veteran board member, how have your motivations changed since you initially became involved on the board? What is keeping you interested in volunteering on this board?

10. What tasks and roles on the board would you find particularly challenging, interesting or rewarding?

11. Do you have any specific goals or objectives that you are hoping to accomplish while on the board? Are these goals compatible with the organization's goals and objectives?

Now let's examine what you have to offer the organization.

What Can You Offer?

You are coming to the board of directors with a unique and valuable set of skills, knowledge, experiences and other assets. By clearly defining the resources you are able and willing to offer the board of directors, you will be able to target your contributions for the organization's maximum benefit and for your greatest satisfaction.



A board of directors typically needs a variety of resources among its members, such as:

- Skills in its major functions, such as finances and human resources.
- Experience with boards, committees and service delivery
- A diversity of backgrounds such as culture, gender and geographic region
- The perspective brought by clients, ex-clients and volunteers involved in service delivery
- Contributions of time, financial support, influence
- Contacts with potential donors, government, media and other community organizations
- Attributes such as commitment, leadership, vision and team orientation.

It is unlikely, if not impossible, that any one board member would possess strengths in all these areas. However, most or all these assets would be represented among an effective board's various members.

To expand its assets, a board will often recruit members to provide strength in a particular area. For instance, an organization that is striving to increase its community profile may specifically recruit a board member with public relations skills. Have you been recruited to the board to provide a particular skill or attribute? Find out if this is the case. Be clear with the organization about whether you are willing to contribute the asset the organization is seeking from you.



Is the organization aware of the assets you have to offer? Try doing an inventory of what you have to offer and what you would like to learn. Then let the organization know so it can provide you with board assignments that fulfill your expectations and theirs.

To do an inventory of your assets, next do the Asset Inventory exercise.

Asset Inventory (Exercise)

Are you aware of what you have to offer the board of directors? Does the organization know what you can and will contribute? Below is a list of attributes, skills, experiences and other resources that a board typically requires. While you are not expected to contribute all of these assets, it is important for a board to have a diversity of resources available from its board members.



Part I develops a profile of the unique background that you bring to the board. Simply check off those attributes that describe you.

Part II identifies some of the assets that you would like to contribute or learn. In the first column, click on the box next to each asset that you are able and willing to offer the organization. Then, in the second column, click on the box next to each area in which you hope the organization can offer you learning or experience. If you are a veteran board member, look at the items you have checked off and think about whether you are currently contributing or learning in these areas. If not, why not?

Print this page, fill out the form below, and share your inventory with the board – it's more likely you'll be given opportunities to optimize your contributions and your learning.

Part I – Profile your background

Gender:

Woman
Man

Age:

Under 35
35 to 50
51 to 65
Over 65

Occupation:

Racial/Cultural Background:

Aboriginal
Asian
Black
Caucasian
Other: _____

Language:

English
French
Spanish
Other: _____

Geographical Location:

Urban
Rural
Community/Region: _____

Time Available to Contribute to the Board:

3 hours or less per month
3 – 5 hours per month
5 – 10 hours per month
10 to 15 hours per month

Other: _____

Part II – Identify what you can contribute and what you hope to learn

Asset	Able and Willing to Contribute	Hope to Learn or Experience
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Board and Committee Related Experience:

- Prior experience on a board of directors
 - Prior experience on this organization's board of directors
 - Executive committee
 - Nominating committee
 - Program committee
 - Board development committee
 - Finance committee
 - Fundraising/resource development committee
 - Public relations committee
 - Human resources committee
 - Other: _____
-

Skills and Expertise:

- Constitution/Bylaws
 - Policy development
 - Strategic planning
 - Board recruitment
 - Fundraising
 - Budgeting/Fiscal control
 - Accounting
 - Investments
 - Law
 - Contracting/Negotiations
 - Sales
 - Government/Regulatory Issues
 - Advocacy/Lobbying
 - Real estate/Building/Physical Plant
 - Information Technology
 - Public relations
 - Marketing
 - Training/Education
 - Human resources
 - Organizational development
 - Management or delivery of not-for-profit programs
 - Other: _____
-

Contacts and Influence:

- Corporate and business
 - Government
 - Political
 - Media
 - Funders
 - Education
 - Health
 - Other not-for-profit organizations
 - Other: _____
-

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Financial Support:

Personal financial contribution to the organization

Approach contacts/use influence to obtain financial contributions to the organization

Participate in the organization's fundraising/resource development activities

Other: _____

Past or Current Program Participation:

Consumer/Client of the organization's programs

Association with consumer/client of the organization's programs

Volunteer involvement in delivery of the organization's programs

Volunteer involvement in other aspects of the organization

Other: _____

Now you know what you have to offer the organization, but do you know enough about the organization to commit as a board member? Move on to identify what you need to know about the organization.

What Do You Need to Know?

Before you commit to a board of directors, be sure you have all the facts. Know what you are walking into. Know what is expected of you. Be certain this commitment fits with your goals and your assets.



Many boards provide their members with board manuals or orientation and training sessions. If these resources are available to you, take advantage of them. If you do not have access to these tools, seek out the information you require. It is particularly important to do so *before* you sign on with the board. However, even veteran board members may have information gaps, or may benefit from refreshing and updating their knowledge.

What do you need to know in order to ensure this is the right commitment for you? You should seek out information in the following areas:

- Requirements of you as a board member
- History of the organization
- Mission and values
- Programs and services
- Board structure and governance
- Finances and fundraising
- Planning
- Policy development
- Human resources
- Public relations
- Legal issues

For specific information you need in each of these areas, refer to the Know Your Organization exercise.

How do you access this information? You could:

- Interview the Nominating Committee, President or Executive Director
- Attend a board meeting
- Request such documents as:
 - Brochures
 - Newsletters
 - Annual report and audited financial statements
 - Program or service summaries
 - Organizational chart
 - By-laws
 - Board and committee job descriptions
 - Board roster
 - Budget
 - Strategic plan.

For specific information, start to get to know your organization.

Get to Know Your Organization

If you can answer the following questions about the organization, you are well equipped to decide whether to commit to the board of directors. You'll probably be one of the most well informed board members too!



Clue ... if you don't know where to find the answers to these questions, What Do You Need to Know? may contain some ideas.

1. Requirements of you as a board member

- What is the time commitment that is expected of you?
- What are the expectations regarding meeting attendance?
- Is committee involvement required?
- Are you expected to make financial contributions to the organization?
- Is your attendance required at fundraising events and other organization functions?
- Does the organization expect you to be directly involved in the delivery of its programs?

2. History of the organization

- How long has the organization existed?
- Why was the organization founded?
- What have been some of the significant changes in and accomplishments of the organization?

3. Mission and values

- What is the organization's mission or purpose?
- What values does the organization embrace?

4. Programs and services

- What services does the organization offer to pursue its mission?
- Whom does the organization serve?
- How does the organization know its services are effective?

5. Board structure and governance

- How is the board structured?
- Who are the officers of the board?
- What are the committees of the board? What are the committee's roles?
- How would you characterize the board's model of governance?
- Are board training opportunities provided?

6. Finances and fundraising

- What is the status of the organization's financial health?
- How is the organization funded?
- What sorts of fundraising activities they are involved in?
- Does the organization subscribe to a fundraising and financial accountability code of ethics?

7. Planning

- Does the organization have a strategic plan?
- What are their current challenges and how is the organization addressing them?
- What changes do they expect in the foreseeable future?

8. Policy development

- How are policies developed?
- Who is involved in policy development?

9. Human resources

- How is the organization staffed?
- What are the qualifications of the senior staff?
- Does the organization have volunteer management policies?
- What is the board's relationship to staff and volunteers?

10. Public relations

- How does the organization collaborate with other groups?
- Is the organization affiliated with regional or national "umbrella" associations?
- How does the organization market itself to the community?
- Does the organization have an emergency response plan?

11. Legal issues

- Does the organization carry director's and officer's liability insurance?
- Are there any outstanding or potential lawsuits?
- Does the organization comply with all legal and regulatory requirements?
- What risks are inherent in the organization's operations and how are they managed?

If the answers to these questions were not provided to you in an information package or board manual, you could suggest to the board that a package or manual be developed for prospective and existing board members.

You are now armed with the information you need to decide if you and the organization are a compatible match.

Are You Compatible?

You might commit to a board of directors with good intentions, only to find later that you are not compatible with the organization or with the board. Perhaps your values clash with those of the board, and you encounter uncomfortable conflicts. Maybe you feel that your skills are not being utilized, so your interest wanes and you stop attending meetings. Or maybe the expectations of a board member are greater than you anticipate, and you burn out.



The end result of such incompatibility is often lost productivity for the board and unfulfilled expectations for you. You can avoid experiencing this unrealized potential by doing your homework before committing ...

1. Clearly and honestly identify your motivations and goals for becoming involved with the board, and communicate them to the organization. Discuss with the organization ways for you to fulfill your goals and the organization's needs.
2. Determine what assets you have to offer the board, and let the organization know what you are able and willing to contribute.
3. Get to know the organization. Access essential information about the organization and its operations.
4. Compare what you have learned about the organization and its opportunities, with your motivations, goals, assets, and learning needs. Ask yourself:
 - Can I fulfill the expectations that the organization has of me?
 - Can I achieve my personal goals by participating as a board member in this organization?
 - Could a need of the organization be met through my skills, experience, and other resources?
5. Based on this assessment, decide whether volunteering as a board member would be beneficial to the organization and rewarding to you.

By ensuring a fit between you and the organization, you lay the foundation for a positive, fulfilling board experience. But if you decide that a board commitment is not for you, perhaps there are other volunteer roles in the organization that would be a better fit. If you decide that you are not compatible with this particular board, investigate other organizations that could benefit from what you have to offer.



To learn how and why others have become involved in boards, meet your "classmates".

Meet Your Classmates

Meet Carlos...

I'm 28 years old and I'm a computer programmer. I first became involved with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Forest City two years ago because I wanted to give back to the community that gave me so much. I grew up in a single parent family, and had a teacher who was like a mentor to me. He encouraged me to translate my obsession with computer games into a successful information technology career. I decided to volunteer with Big Brothers Big Sisters so I could provide this kind of guidance and support to another needy child.

I've been matched with my Little Brother for over two years. He can be a handful, and sometimes my busy work schedule gets in the way, but overall we've had a great time together. I can see how much he's changed, and that makes me believe in the program even more. I think I'll always be his Big Brother, even after our match is officially over.

At my last annual match review, my caseworker and the Executive Director asked me to consider becoming a board member. They told me that the board could use my perspective as a Big Brother with a challenging but positive match. They also said that the agency needs my computer expertise.

I've never been involved in a board of directors before, and I'm not sure what to expect. I guess I'm feeling a bit anxious and uncertain about the responsibility I'm taking on, and after completing Module 1, I realize I'm a bit fuzzy on my goals and motivations for joining the board. But it sounds like they're desperate for a Big Brother to sit on the board, and maybe that's a good enough reason for me to join. Why is it so important for me to be clear about my personal goals and motivations for getting involved?

- (A) So that you can target your contributions to maximize benefit for the organization.
- (B) To ensure that you take on assignments that you will find most rewarding.
- (C) To ensure that your objectives are compatible with the organization's needs and goals.
- (D) All of the above.

Now that you have listened to Carlos and helped with his concerns, see what Debra has to say.

Meet Your Classmates

Meet Debra...

I answered a newspaper ad for board members placed by Garden Town Family Services two years ago. I met with the Executive Director, hoping I would find opportunities to contribute and to gain some career related benefits.

At age 41, I was hoping to re-enter the paid workforce as an account manager in the banking industry, my occupation before I became a stay-at-home parent to my two children. I knew that I needed to add some current leadership experience to my resume to achieve my career goal. I thought perhaps board involvement could give me that experience.

I was also excited about getting involved in Family Service's new mentoring program for teen parents. My cousin was a single mom at age sixteen, and back then there weren't any services to provide her with support. I saw how she and her son struggled. A mentor could have made a big difference! I guess I felt close to this cause, and thought maybe I could reach out to those girls.

The first few months on the board were a whirlwind! I didn't really have much of an orientation, except for that meeting with the Executive Director. We talked about the agency and its programs, and she invited me to the next board meeting. Well, before I knew it, the board had voted me on as a member.

I was quickly placed on the fundraising committee. You see, I had some time on my hands while my kids were in school, and I ended up being the only one who could get a lot of things done during daytime hours for the agency's fundraisers. I became the ticket printer, the balloon blower and the door prize requester. It's not quite the leadership experience that I thought would help me land the banking job that still isn't mine nearly two years later! And I've been so busy as a worker bee for all these events that I'm starting to burn out.

I've been asked to stand for re-election at the next annual general meeting. I'm not sure what to do. I think this is an important cause, but I'm feeling disillusioned with my board experience. Can you help me to figure out why I'm feeling this way?

What do you think has led me to feel so disillusioned with my board involvement?

- (A) You seem clear about what you want to get out of your board involvement. The organization isn't making the best use of your talents, though, because you haven't identified and communicated the assets that you are willing to offer the board and the opportunities you are seeking from your involvement.
- (B) Your goals related to your board involvement are completely unrealistic.
- (C) Maybe your goals and assets are not compatible with the board's goals and needs.
- (D) Both A and C above.

Now you are ready to move to the next section - understand the board context and role.