

**How Much Do I Get Paid to Be on this Nonprofit
Board and Other Questions to Ask**

by Carol E. Weisman

One of the funniest questions I have ever been asked was “how much money are you paid to be on the board of a nonprofit.” When I explained that nonprofit board members donate both time and money, the woman was aghast.

Board membership is an honor, a privilege, a responsibility, and at times, a pain the neck. No one in the corporate world has an abundance of time. Asking the right questions will ensure that you not only don't waste your time, money or talents, but that you are not endangering the well being of those served by the organization by a poor fit between you and the organization.

What you need to know about the board you are thinking of joining?

1. When and where are the meetings?

Some questions are extremely basic, for instance when and where are the meetings. If you have a staff meeting the first Friday of the month, which is the same time the board meets, board membership might not be possible.

If you are joining a national board, are the meetings always in the same place. With a local board, are they in an area you feel comfortable visiting alone? Does the meeting location vary? Perhaps the board might want a more central location. Is the board pleased with their meeting site? Can you be of help finding a different location?

2. What is the mission of the agency and what are their challenges?

Does the agency have a clearly defined mission and are you comfortable with all aspects of it? Are there plans to change the mission? Some agencies have “mission creep.” They start out to provide a certain service, and as the funding dries up, they offer another. The focus of the agency starts to blur. Look for an agency who knows who they are, what they provide and who the client is, or be prepared to help them come to terms with these questions.

Ask what are the most difficult challenges facing the agency in the next two years. For instance, are they contemplating a capital campaign for a new building? Is there a change in their fund raising capabilities because of the end of a long-term grant? Are there any pending lawsuits? Ask to find any skeletons before you read about them on the front page with your

name listed as a board member.

You may want to take a look at both the 501-C3 form and the 990. These are forms filed with the internal revenue service, which will give you a picture of the nonprofits financial health as well as tax status. Beware if they are not readily provided. These are public documents and should be provided immediately.

3. What are the financial expectations for both you and your company?

Talking about money is always a somewhat delicate issue. Getting a straight answer is important. What does the board expect of its members financially? If the answer is rather vague, such as “whatever you think is right” ask more specific questions such as “What is the average board gift?

What percentage of the board give an annual gift?”

How does the nonprofit earn money? Are you comfortable with their fund raising techniques and their expectations of you? Do they want you to solicit friends and business associates? Turn over client's names? Are there scheduled fund raising events in which you are expected to participate? What is the cost of the tickets? Is this an event you would enjoy participating in? For instance, if there is a regular golf tournament, and you are a non-golfer, would there be another possible place to devote your time.

Is your corporation already donating to this agency? If so, how much and what kind of support? Money or good and services? If not, what would the agency like from your company? Does the agency need a place to have meetings or training sessions? Do they expect access to your

customers or mailing lists? Do they need equipment such as computers, faxes, vans, buses etc.? What kind of other support would they like from your company such as products, professional help in accounting, marketing, advertising etc.

You may have to go back to your company to get the answers to these questions. Make a list. Get back to the nominating committee with the answers.

4. Why are they interested in you?

Is the nominating committee aware of the skills you have and are these ones you want to use as a board member?

There are basically two types of board members, those who want to use the skills they have to help the community and those who want to develop new skills. For instance, an accountant might want to serve on the facilities committee rather than the audit committee.

Is race or gender or health status a major reason you have been nominated? Are there other board members who are in the same category? Would you be the sole representative of this group? Are you comfortable with this? Only you can decide.

If your corporation wouldn't support your board service, would they still want you? Is the board interesting in your connections or your skills? If they are interested in your connections and you cannot use them to further their mission, would they still be interested in you? An interesting question to ask the nominating committee is whether they would want you if you changed jobs or position within your current company.

5. What does the board consider their greatest asset? Could they share or let you experience their program?

If the agency represents the arts, go to an exhibition or performance, if they are in the social services, interview a staff member. Ask to meet with the people who can answer your questions in depth. If you are interested in program, ask to meet with front line staff. If you are interested in the financial issues facing the agency, ask to speak with the treasurer.

6. Who are the other board members?

Be sure to look at a current list. Are you comfortable with the names on the list? Is there anyone who is a major competitor of your company that could pose a problem? Are there

people whose ethical standards you question? If so, look elsewhere.

7. How long is the term?

You are not joining the Supreme Court. There should be clearly defined board terms. You need to know how long you're signing on for.

8. Can you attend a board meeting before joining?

Attending a single board meeting will tell you a lot about the board. Do the meetings start on time? Is there a clear agenda and financial report? Do you like these people? Do you want to spend time working with them? Does the board meeting proceed in an orderly, concise manner? Is this a "rubber stamp" board where questions and debate are unwelcome? Does business proceed at a pace you are comfortable with?

Sometimes a board meeting is so cold and formal; it is simply no fun. The formality can seem abrasive. Other meetings are so informal and loose; nothing seems to be getting done. Find a board where the style is right for you.

9. Is there a strategic or long-term plan? Can you look at it?

Established organizations should have a plan. You might not find this in a start-up venture, but they should be initiating one. If the organization is not on target with a current plan, what are the reasons? Is there something you can do because of your talents, skills or connections to help the nonprofit get back on track. For instance, if they have lost a major contract or had a fire, can you help rebuild?

10. What is the time requirement per month or year for board membership?

Always be concerned when told the time commitment is very, very little. If this is coming from the executive director, it might mean he/she does not want an involved board. Remember that part of your responsibility is to make sure the nonprofit is functioning well and the executive is doing his/her job. This kind of knowledge is not attained in 5 hours a year.

When such an answer comes from the chairman of the board, it might mean you are being asked as a token of a group, whether as a representative from your company, or because of race, religion, gender, etc. It also might mean they are not being totally honest. Ask them how much time they spend a month on board issues.

11. Is there a clearly defined committee structure? What committee would be best for you?

Make sure you are able to serve in an area that would be of the greatest interest to you. If you are interested in joining the board because you want to be a part of program evaluation, don't be pushed into special events or nominating.

12. Is there director and officer's insurance? If not, why not?

Laws in various states vary as to liability. Has your agency ever been sued? If so, what were the specifics of the case and how was it resolved?

Summary and Advice

The best advice is to ask lots of questions, sit back and listen.

Approach board membership as you would approach a job. If there is not a good fit, if you don't have the financial or time requirements needed to do a good job consider not joining. You and your company will be judged in by the other board members and the community on the job you do. Board service poorly done can prevent business opportunities for the future. If you don't come to board meetings, meet deadlines and contribute financially, the assumption will be made that you have the same low standards in business. Finally, if you don't have a passionate interest in the mission, look elsewhere.

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