

Get on board

If you want to serve on a nonprofit's board of directors, start by doing your homework

Sunday, March 8, 2005

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The Ann Arbor News

About 18 months ago I joined the board of The Women's Center of America, a small Ann Arbor nonprofit. I had no idea what I was in for - and I suspect that's true for many first-time board members.

The experience has been great. I'm learning more than I expected, and on most days feel I'm getting more out of it than the center - an advocate for the economic and emotional growth of women and girls - is getting out of me.

The Women's Center is one of more than 1,000 nonprofits in Washtenaw County alone, from small groups that survive by a thread to well-funded, high-profile institutions like Food Gatherers or the Ann Arbor Art Center. Some of these are business-related nonprofits like the local chambers of commerce, while others have missions tied to social services or the arts.

All of these groups struggle with similar issues - fund-raising chief among them, these days. And all of these groups need board members to support their work. People in the local business community make up a large percentage of these volunteers, as well as people from academics, government and those I'd describe as community activists.

There are power board members like Joe Fitzsimmons and Letitia Byrd, whose names show up on a raft of rosters and who've been board veterans for decades. But there are many novices like me, who haven't previously been on a board and who are learning as we go. And if you haven't already served, chances are - if you have even the slightest interest in doing so - that you'll be asked.

"I think the environment is very competitive for recruiting," says Bill Beardsley, chairman of the board for the Washtenaw County chapter of the American Red Cross. I talked to Bill and several other longtime board members, asking them what advice they have for people who might want to go down this road. Here's what they had to say.

Do your research

Asking questions is an important first step. "We encourage people to really do their homework," says Susan Katz Froning, president of the Ann Arbor-based Nonprofit Enterprise at Work, known as the NEW Center. Find out as much as you can about the

organization - and look deeper than what's on the group's Web site. Talk to current staff and board members. Ask about the group's strategic plan. It might be a bad sign if they don't have one.

Like the corporate world, a board's fiscal responsibility has become increasingly important in recent years. Ask pointed questions about the organization's fiscal health - get financial statements and IRS 990 forms, which the nonprofit should provide. Find out if there are any pending lawsuits or other controversies.

The NEW Center, a kind of über group charged with supporting nonprofits in this region, is a great resource. One of the books in NEW's library - "The Business Professional's Guide to Nonprofit Board Service" - is especially useful, a straightforward look at how to get involved and how to avoid common pitfalls.

Know what's in it for you

Perhaps most importantly, you need to make sure the organization is a good match with your own interests and skills. (Obviously, the person recruiting you will be looking at the same thing, from the organization's perspective.)

Networking is an important motivation for many business people who serve on boards, says Andy Eggan, an attorney with the local law firm Pear, Sperling, Eggan & Daniels who serves on the Ypsilanti Area Chamber of Commerce board, among others. That doesn't mean the unctuous foisting-a-business-card-in-your-face glad-handing. It means meeting and getting to know people who might turn out to be good connections for your business, too. It also can be a chance for professional growth, says Beardsley, who's president and chief lending officer for Michigan Business Connection, an Ann Arbor firm.

His first board membership was the result of "organizational creep" at the New Enterprise Forum, a local business group that connects entrepreneurs with potential investors. He started attending monthly meetings, then volunteered to serve on a committee - and before long, he was standing up in front of a crowd honing his public speaking skills as NEF president.

But business networking shouldn't be the only factor in your decision, Eggan and others say. "There are so many different nonprofits," says Jeff Hall, a board member for the Ann Arbor Art Center and owner of Second-To-None, a "mystery shopper" firm. "Find something that speaks to you or has some kind of meaningful connection to you."

Beardsley agrees. "There's got to be a spark of passion somewhere for the organization or the people it serves," he says. If not, you're likely to burn out quickly or be disengaged from the group - and the experience won't be good for you or the organization you're working with.

Clarify expectations

It's critical to understand your role on the board - and how you're expected to contribute. Are you being brought on primarily to raise money? Because you've got certain skills - legal, financial, operational - that the group wants to tap? Because you represent a certain segment of the population - a racial or ethnic minority, gender or age group?

Fund-raising is a major issue for almost all nonprofits, even large ones with established endowments and committed, deep-pocketed donors. If you aren't comfortable asking your friends and acquaintances for money - or if you can't do it for conflict-of-interest reasons - you need to address that before joining the board. You also need to find out if the group requires board members to make a minimum annual donation - if you can't afford it, that's a problem.

You also need to grapple with how much time you're willing to invest - and how much time the organization will demand of you. "It's easy to say yes - and they'll take that," Hall says. In fact, everyone I've talked to about this kind of commitment has stressed the need for balance: with your job, your family, your volunteer efforts. Take on too much and you'll regret it on all fronts - and set yourself up for failure.

Next steps

The NEW Center runs a program called BoardConnect that hooks up potential candidates with boards that are recruiting. That's one way to get started (see the box on Page F1 for more details).

Joining a board should be a decision grounded in passions both personal and professional. It's not for everyone - but it might just be for you.

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