

# Board Café

July 13, 1999. Vol. 3, No. 7

07-13-1999

## The Electronic Newsletter Exclusively for Members of Nonprofit Boards of Directors

Short enough to read over a cup of coffee, the Board Café offers a menu of ideas, information, opinion, news, and resources to help board members give and get the most out of board service. Co-published by CompassPoint Nonprofit Services and the National Center for Nonprofit Boards. Executive Chef / Editor: Jan Masaoka. July 13, 1999. Vol. 3, No. 7

### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE JOINING YOUR NEXT BOARD

Okay, you're having a great time serving on a board, but your term limit is coming up, or you're moving to a new community, or you just need a change. If asked why you joined your current board, chances are you'd reply, "because someone asked me." As you consider joining another board, here are some questions to ask yourself:

#### IS THIS THE RIGHT CAUSE AND ORGANIZATION FOR ME?

Approach this decision as if you were planning to make a major donation: you would probably begin by thinking of areas where you have strong feelings-perhaps care for the elderly, or civil rights, or the environment. After settling on a subject area, you might then learn about several different organizations working in that field, and investigate ones that seem to have high impact and are well managed. Only after you were fully satisfied would you make the donation.

The next time you consider joining a board, first ask yourself whether you truly feel strongly about the type of work that the organization does and the people it serves. Since, as a board member, you'll be investing not only money but time and energy, ask yourself whether the organization seems to be a pretty good risk as an investment.

#### CAN I WORK WITH THIS AGENCY AND THIS BOARD AT THIS PARTICULAR STAGE IN ITS LIFE?

At one time in an organization's life, board service may be fairly smooth with a few bumps, while at another time board service may involve a hair-raising roller coaster ride (of course, an unexpected event can throw any board for a loop). What type of board seems right for you right now? You may want a board that really lets you roll up your sleeves and get to work with the other board members, or you may want a board that is stable and can let you learn about board work in a deliberate way.

#### WHAT CAN I, AND WHAT WILL I, CONTRIBUTE TO THIS ORGANIZATION?

What skills, contacts, and perspectives do I have that will be useful to this organization? How, specifically, will the board use what I can bring? Often as board members we find that some of our talents and contacts never seem to get utilized by the boards we're on. Perhaps you gave up a music career for accounting, or have writing skills that are not used at your job. Perhaps your customer network includes dozens of influential community leaders. Consider first what you bring to the table, and then, whether you are willing to give that to the organization. Look, too, for vehicles for your skills: if you can't see a specific vehicle (work on an event, help market a service, work with the Treasurer), your desire to contribute may well go unfulfilled. Ask yourself:

Do I believe in this organization enough to introduce my customers to it? Can I make a commitment to attending at least 75% of the meetings? Am I willing to give up one or more evenings a month? Am I willing to make a generous donation? Can I volunteer with other board members on occasional Saturdays? Would I feel comfortable having my name on their letterhead or on their brochure? The right time to ask these questions is before, not after, you have

joined the board.

This final question is one that potential candidates should ask themselves and one that active board members should periodically re-examine during their board service:

### **WHAT DO I WANT TO GET OUT OF BEING ON THIS BOARD?**

An all-too-common experience for board members at the ends of their terms is a feeling that they didn't, after all, really get deeply involved and don't, as a result, feel that they either contributed as much or got as much as they had hoped when they first joined. Board members who plan and ask for what they want in the board will contribute more as well as gain more. For example, if you don't have a finance background but wish you knew more about finance, consider asking to be appointed to the Finance Committee. If there's a community leader on the Program Committee who you would love to get to know, ask to be on the Program Committee, and put in the time to be sure you get to know all the members well. If one of your reasons for joining the board was to meet new people, volunteer to help put on the annual luncheon or staff the table at a street fair.

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