

Are You Making the Difference That You Envisioned?

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Nonprofit board service is a golden opportunity to make a difference in your community. However, once enmeshed with board matters, it can be difficult to make the contribution that you envisioned. According to Mariam Ghazvini, a Leadership Development Consultant at XCEO who specializes in the public sector, "Executives and directors in nonprofits are so overwhelmed with the day-to-day operations of their entities and the budget issues that they deal with that they really don't stop and think about how the Board of Directors can help." What Dr. Ghazvini describes leads to inefficiency, and stunts the organization's impact.

Although nonprofit boards do not have shareowners, they do have stakeholders. Board members have an obligation to maximize the value they deliver to the organization and its stakeholders, including the organization's employees, donors, community, and most importantly, the people it serves. This obligation is no less great because nonprofit boards are not regulated in the same way as corporate boards. On the contrary, nonprofit board members hold positions of great trust, as well as great risk – reputational and legal hazards are inherent in all board service. Enlightened directors recognize this and strive to serve at the highest level, beyond what they are required to do.

With that in mind, we have put together five recommendations for how you, as a nonprofit director, can raise your level of contribution and have a strong impact on stakeholder value. This, in turn, minimizes your personal risk from nonprofit board service and increases your exposure for future board opportunities.

1. Commit to attending and being fully present at all board meetings.

Although meeting attendance may seem basic, and therefore unimportant, it is fundamental to being an effective director. You may have observed that directors sometimes arrive late, leave early or miss entire meetings due to conflicting obligations. Other directors are nominally present, but due to a lack of attention or preparation, or even a poor attitude, contribute little to the proceedings.

For enlightened directors, showing up on time and participating constructively in every meeting is the default practice. You can accomplish this through effective planning, preparation, and not underestimating your other commitments. This demonstrates respect for your fellow directors, the organization and its stakeholders, and the business at hand. If you and your colleagues believe the items on the agenda are not worth the board's full attention, then you should advocate refocusing future board meetings on more essential matters.

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2. Prepare proactively for board meetings.

Plan to read lengthy materials, and allow enough time to digest the information so that you fully understand it and are prepared contribute to the discussion. Identify questions that you have, as well as specific areas that you believe the board should review. Highly effective directors also search for relevant information outside of the board materials and strive to add unique value based on their own experiences and expertise.

An example of a nonprofit director who places a great deal of emphasis on preparation is Korin Crawford, Chair of the Development Committee of the East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation (EBALDC). He is also Founder & CEO of Ekology Infrastructure, a next-generation investment and development company. Crawford describes his approach to fulfilling both his board and business responsibilities as “relentless prioritization, preparation and planning.” This commitment of time and effort up front saves him time later, allowing him to more effectively serve his clients, continue to build Ekology and contribute maximum value to his board.

3. Strive for alignment with your board, but not at the expense of sufficient discussion.

One of the most important assets you bring to your board is your unique mix of attributes, skills and experiences. This allows you to see matters differently than other members of your board. However, an emphasis on your perspective at the expense of your colleagues' can lead to contention, which interferes with the board's functioning. On the other hand, agreeing too quickly can lead to a failure to fully consider the implications of the board's decisions.

To be most effective, you and your colleagues should be fully aligned on certain principles, such as the values of your organization and treating each other with respect. This gives you a foundation to discuss potentially difficult issues, disagree, and develop your understanding in a productive way. On some topics you may arrive at alignment relatively quickly, and on others, it may take time. In all cases, you should contribute your perspective and listen thoughtfully to your colleagues with a view toward becoming aligned on the issue.

4. Take time at least once a year to reflect on your performance as a director, relative to your expectations.

Evaluating yourself helps you identify areas in which you are doing well, as well as areas in which you have the opportunity to improve. There are several approaches you could take for your personal performance review, but for a clearer understanding of the data that you generate and the ability to measure changes over time, we recommend using an evaluation tool. XCEO offers several options for nonprofit directors to gain a complete picture of their performance.

An evaluation process is also helpful for the board and its committees, but as an individual director we recommend that you engage in a personal period of reflection regardless of whether your board does so or not. As an added benefit, if your board is not currently receptive to evaluations, your increasingly valuable contribution may encourage your board to consider conducting assessments in the future and so raise your colleagues' performance as well.

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5. Encourage the use of a board portal.

Although many boards still mail out board books and require physical signatures on approvals, well-implemented board portals increase security and efficiency and reduce the amount of time it takes to produce each board book. They also allow directors to receive their materials much more quickly and conveniently and save money by reducing printing and mailing costs.

There are many choices of board portals, but for best results, look for one that includes the ability to access materials, polls and evaluations offline so that directors can work when they have time, rather than when they have an internet connection. Another important feature is signature capability, which allows directors to vote and sign documents remotely. XCEO offers a high-quality, cost-effective portal for nonprofit boards that meets all of these requirements and adds several other user-friendly features.

As a nonprofit director, you have an opportunity, and an obligation, to serve your board and stakeholders to the best of your ability. However, without deliberate effort on your part, your day job, regular board work and unexpected demands on your organization can converge to hobble your effectiveness. Conscientious practice of these five recommendations provides an excellent foundation to increase your impact on the board and maximize your organization's value to all of its stakeholders.

About XCEO, Inc.

XCEO Inc. (<http://www.xceo.net>) is a leadership and governance consulting firm focused on providing corporate and public sector boards and directors full service offerings including individual director education and development, board recruiting and on-boarding services, automated performance assessments and a secure board portal for increased efficiency, communication and collaboration. Through its professional mentoring services, XCEO also works with senior executives on personal leadership and entrepreneurial initiatives as well as professional advancement strategy and board positioning. XCEO serves clients ranging from Silicon Valley start-ups to Fortune 500 companies.

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