



## From Courtship to Board Service: The Top 10 Questions to Ask before Accepting an Invitation to Serve on a Nonprofit Board (Part One)

Written by Theresa B. Kiernan



### Article Highlights

- Nonprofit board service can be very rewarding, both personally and professionally, if board members believe in the missions of the organizations they serve.
- Ensure that the nonprofit you are considering serving is aligned with your own personal interests.
- Public Sector organizations are looking for outstanding board members to further the success of the nonprofit and the quality and quantity of products and services delivered to the nonprofit clients in the community.

Congratulations! You've been asked to serve on a nonprofit board and it is an honor to be asked. Nonprofit organizations are always looking for individuals whose skills and experiences can be helpful to the organization. This type of volunteer work can be highly rewarding, both personally and professionally, especially if there is a good fit between how you wish to be involved and what the nonprofit believes it needs or wants from you as a board member. However, before you say yes, let me share with you what I believe to be the top 10 questions you should ask before accepting this wonderful invitation to serve on a nonprofit board. Part 1 will cover the first five of the top 10, with the remaining five to be addressed in a subsequent issue.

The first question that needs to be addressed is *Why me?* You should really understand why you, specifically, are being invited to serve on the board. For successful longevity, it is recommended that nonprofit board members have the skills and experiences that complement the different management and operational responsibilities of the organization. Diversification is also recommended as a means to provide the best representation for the clients served by the nonprofit's mission. So what factor(s) were considered by the board and the executive management staff to specifically target you to serve as a potential board member? Was it your age, your gender, or your ethnicity? Strategic plans for nonprofits can include new or improved relationships with other groups or organizations. Would you provide that connection for the nonprofit? Don't be afraid to ask why they chose you and be sure you are comfortable with their reasoning.

*What is the mission of the nonprofit?* The importance of this question lies in the legal duty of a board member to act in the best interest of the nonprofit at all times. You must be certain that the mission of the nonprofit doesn't conflict with any personal interests. Being aware of any misalignment can save you and the nonprofit from any personal or professional disappointments or challenges in the future. An example of such a misalignment is a nonprofit whose mission it is to rescue pets from abusive situations asking you to serve on their board. You have never had, nor will you ever have, a pet and will even go so far as to say you are not an animal lover. This nonprofit may not be where you'd like to donate your time, talent and especially treasure on a regular basis. While this is a somewhat simplistic example, it helps make the point that there are so many wonderful nonprofit boards looking for good board members. So, when asked to serve be sure the mission of the organization aligns with your personal interests.

Another question to consider is *who does the nonprofit serve and how is the nonprofit regarded?* Spend some time observing, or even volunteering, at one of the programs that the nonprofit provides for the community. You will have the opportunity to observe how the staff interacts with clients and talk to the clients about their participation in the programs of the XYZ nonprofit. This firsthand experience will provide you the opportunity to determine if this is the type of philanthropic work you would proudly attach your name and reputation. If a personal visit is not a viable option, then at least view the website of the nonprofit. Websites can be very telling regarding the breadth and depth of the



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organization and its work. Look for any testimonials, a list of affiliations or partners in the community, or just simply read through the mission, vision and program descriptions to garner a sense of the work and focus of the nonprofit.

*How well do the board and the Chair work together?* I highly recommend an individual meeting with the President/CEO/Executive Director of the nonprofit and the Chair of the Board. Knowing the relationship between the two top leaders of the nonprofit is a leading indicator of the effectiveness and productivity of the board, and more importantly, how effectively and successfully the nonprofit fulfills its mission. Be prepared to ask each of them how they feel about the other. What do they see as the strengths that are brought to the table by the other? Ask them to tell you how they work together. These questions will help you identify any strong indicator(s) that the President/CEO and the Chair do not see eye to eye and a conflict may exist. Such a relationship could be challenging for the board and the nonprofit, and it would be helpful for you to know this before taking a seat at the boardroom table. And if you have the time and are so inclined, talking to at least one other board member is helpful in assessing the personality of the board and the relationship between the Executive Director and the Chair.

And finally, for now, the last question of Part I *What is the structure of the board? Is there a committee assignment required? When and for how long do the meetings take place?* This very important logistical information is helpful in fully assessing whether or not you can donate the time needed to be a fully engaged and reliable board member. The requirements do vary with boards. It is expected that you will be present for every board meeting and it is also likely required that each board member sit on at least one committee. Board meeting times and frequency of meetings vary. For simplicity sake, let's say the full board meets monthly for two hours and the committee also meets for an hour, at least, if not longer. You already have a time commitment of three or more hours monthly just for regularly scheduled meetings. Special meetings may be called to address an important situation

or opportunity that requires the board's attention and your attendance and more time. And the time commitment doesn't necessarily end there. Often it may be expected of you to attend fundraising or community events to be a board representative. Be as specific as you can to ascertain from the nonprofit as many of the other activities beside board related meetings that could require your time. This knowledge will afford you the ability to be very realistic about the number of hours annually you may need to devote to your service as a nonprofit board member.

Serving on a nonprofit board is an honor and you really need to examine the appropriateness for you to serve. Nonprofits need and rely on individuals like you for overall governance, assistance and engagement in many ways. They are looking for outstanding board members to further the success of the nonprofit, thereby improving the quality and quantity of products and services delivered to the nonprofit clients in the community.

### **Announcement!**

**Stay tuned for Part 2 to explore the last five of the top 10 questions to ask as you determine whether to accept an invitation to serve on a nonprofit board.**

C.E.O.

## About the Author



**Theresa B. Kiernan**  
**Program Director, Public Sector Governance and Board Leadership Development**

Ms. Kiernan brings over 20 years of experience in various management and training roles in the non-profit and for-profit sectors to her role as the non-profit board governance and board leadership development programs director for XCEO. As the Program Director, she provides consultative guidance to advance non-profit board and board member effectiveness in critical functions such as board leadership, risk oversight and succession planning responsibilities.

Theresa has over 10 years of hands-on experience working for non-profits in a variety of roles, including as executive director, development director, program director and volunteer coordinator, to name a few. Her experience includes work for entities with multiple missions, including education, economic and leadership development, and community enhancement and support. Some of organizations she represented include: The San Benito County Chamber of Commerce, Morgan Hill Downtown Association, Leadership Gilroy, the San Benito County Adult Literacy Program, and St. Catherine's School.

In addition to her work experience for various non-profits, she has, and continues to serve on various non-profit boards in the role of member, officer and/or president. These boards represent a cross-section of non-profit purposes such as San Juan Bautista Rotary Club, Rotary District 5170, Mt. Madonna YMCA, Morgan Hill Rotary Club and Leadership Morgan Hill.

Ms. Kiernan also brings valuable experience and lessons learned in her 10 years as a corporate trainer specializing in communication, management and leadership skills for many financial institutions, technology and service sector companies, including Eastman Kodak Company, Xerox, Moody's Investors Service and Chase.

She brings this distinctive blend of hands on experience working in for-profit and non-profit entities, and her extensive background as a board member to her role and assists non-profit boards and board members in becoming more successful in fulfilling their own unique missions.

Theresa earned her BS in Business Administration from Keuka College in Keuka Park, NY, and lives with her husband in Morgan Hill, California. She has two college age children, who she hopes will move back to the area, and enjoys walking, spending time with her family and friends and following her local hockey team, the San Jose Sharks.

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