

Nonprofit Board Member's Job Description

Often board members find themselves on a nonprofit board of directors with no guidance as to what their role is or the organization's expectations of them. This "job description" is actually advice for new board members of nonprofit organizations. Following this advice can lead to a more successful board, a more successful organization and a more enjoyable experience for the new board member.

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Governance

Learn about the organization – its mission, strategic plan, programs, policies, operations, finances, challenges and opportunities. Read the articles of incorporation and bylaws. Participate in the new board member orientation program. Ask questions.

Continue to stay informed during your service on the board. Learn something new about the organization each month. Ask questions.

Attend all board and committee meetings and participate actively. Be attentive during meetings – save the newspaper and your cell phone for the breaks. Come prepared to participate in discussions and make decisions. Review the agenda and any supporting materials prior to the start of the meeting and make notes. Ask questions.

Participate responsibly in board and committee meetings. Know the basic operation of the parliamentary authority used by your organization. Respect your fellow board members and their time. Keep to the agenda and avoid digressions that do not move the organization forward. Ask questions.

Support the decisions of the board. Once a decision has been made, it is the decision of the board. Question it in private with the board if you must but support the decision that is made before the staff, the volunteers and the public.

Use any special skills or training you may have to further the work of the board and the organization. If the organization has staff or paid consultants in your area of expertise, treat them with respect. Express professional disagreement in a way that moves the discussion forward. Your fellow board members may rely on your expertise so be careful in the opinions that you give. You may not consider yourself to be an expert but your fellow board members may. Distinguish your personal opinions from your professional ones when sharing them with the board.

Accept committee assignments and make the most of your committee service. Recognize that not everyone can be on the “fun” committees. The organization is served by the work of all of its committees. Encourage committee rotations if it appears that committee assignments are being used to reward or punish board members or if the senior board members always get their pick of committee assignments.

Accept the non-governance responsibilities that come with service on the board – attend social and other functions sponsored by the organization when your schedule allows, communicate with others about the work of the organization, and show your support for the organization when talking with others.

Follow all conflict of interest and confidentiality policies of the organization. Err on the side of reporting even potential conflicts. Do not ask for favors or special treatment.

Do not take on more responsibility than you can reasonably handle given your employment, family and other social and volunteer commitments. You will be a more effective volunteer if you do one or two assignments well and do not spread yourself too thin.

Finances

Provide financial support to the organization according to your ability. Assist with fundraising efforts.

Be financially literate. Be able to read and understand the financial reports used by your organization. Know the organization's financial situation. Review the 990 filed by the organization each year. Ask questions.

Understand the budget in terms of the dollars but also how the funds are being allocated. Understand what decisions are being made as to the operation of the organization when you approve a budget each year. Establish a policy on how performance against the budget will be measured and how budget adjustments will be handled.

Hire outside auditors. Meet with them as a board without any staff present. Ask tough questions of your outside auditors. (An audit committee may perform this task and report to the full board.) Read the management letter from the auditors and hold staff accountable in reporting back on addressing any items identified as potential problems by the auditors.

Adopt policies on board travel, meeting expenses and reimbursements. Follow the policies and hold other board members to them too.

Performance

Annually assess the performance of the board as a whole and your own performance as a board member. Identify areas in need of improvement and acknowledge those things that are going well. Provide assistance to those board members who are not meeting the expectations of the board. Do not be afraid to ask board members to leave if they are not meeting the expectations of the board and show no sincere interest in doing so.

Annually assess the performance of the organization as a whole. Review the strategic plan and objectives for the years ahead and make adjustments as needed. Coordinate the strategic plan with the budget and ensure that adequate resources are provided to achieve successful results.

Staff

Understand your role as a director and the roles of staff and other volunteers in the governance and operation of the organization.

Respect the senior staff member's position and responsibility to manage the staff. Take up any complaints with the senior staff member. Give recognition and praise to the staff when it is due. Do not ask the staff to support your pet projects. Do not say negative things about other board members to the staff.

Develop the senior staff member's job description and hire the senior staff member. Review his or her performance at least annually, set compensation and goals that are appropriate for the organization, and remove the senior staff person if necessary.

Ensure that there is a succession plan in place for all senior managers.

Review and approve regularly the compensation and benefits package for the employees. Regularly review employment policies and practices. Ensure that the staff is adequate to perform the work that is needed – have the right people for the right jobs and pay them a competitive wage for their profession and your industry and geographic area.

Leadership

Participate in the active recruitment, selection and orientation of new board members. Encourage continuing education for all board members and participate in the programs. Serve as a mentor for a new board member when you are ready.

Help to identify and cultivate new leaders on the board. Participate in the board leadership if you are able to do so.

If your organization does not have term limits, know when it is time for you to step down from the board. If you have recruited new board members and assisted with the development of new leaders on the board, you can step down knowing you are leaving the organization in good hands.