How to be an Effective (non-profit) Board Member

A First Person Primer /Deborah Bryant
Today’s Talk

- Finding your board director “why”.
- Understanding your commitment.
- Making meaningful contributions.

Not

- Picking the right corporate structure.
- Fiscal agentry.
- Fund-raising.

(Different Talk)
Speaker’s context

Civil Service

Advocacy

Public Policy

Education

Activism
Inspect your Motivations

Civic or Social
- Purpose aligned with your own values

Professional
- Overlaps with your area of vocation
- Provides an opportunity to work with other board members you’d not otherwise meet

Personal
- Something you're passionate about
- Provides rich experience and opportunity to hone a range of skills.
Don’t set yourself up for failure.

Be Authentic

If you don’t really care about trees, don’t join the Sierra Club board.
Then ask yourself...

Can I meet these needs without joining the board?

- By volunteering for specific projects or working groups
- Or opening your checkbook (or fund-raising)
Still Tracking?
Cat people slide.
As a board member, your first obligation is to the benefit of the organization. That includes protecting and preserving the institution itself. Take time to understand the corporate status and its obligation (charter). Fully disclosing conflicts of interest as they may arise.

In the US, a non-profit's purpose is baked in to its application approved by the IRS. It must be met and not altered.*
But seriously.

In the US, non-profit charitable status affords certain freedoms in support of carrying out a public benefit mission.
Understand the Board’s Operating Model

- Working or Policy-setting?
- How is the board sustaining or guiding the org?
- How does it function?
Pre-Commitment Checklist

- **Read** the Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws
- Review any other artifacts like Conflict of Interest (CoI) Policies
- Find out how often the board meets and the intervening obligations
- Talk with at least two board members about what is expected and what their experience has been
Dive In!*

*Doesn’t hurt to have a board buddy.
Bring what you’ve got that’s special.

What may *distinguish* your contribution?
Bring what you’ve got that’s boring.

What *gaps* can you fill?

Do the needful, it will be deeply appreciated.
Don’t Over-Commit

Overcommitment:

“To commit excessively: such as; to obligate (someone, such as oneself) beyond the ability for fulfillment.”

Merriam-Webster
Institutional Wisdom for Good not Evil

- Make it easy for others to learn by the board’s mistakes, and its successes.
- Document well.
- Leave a legacy.
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More info on Organizations in Deck

Open Source Initiative
www.opensource.org

Open Source Elections Technology (OSET)
www.osetfoundation.org
www.trustthevote.org

DemocracyLab
www.democracylab.org