

Key Questions to Ask Before Joining a Nonprofit Board



Joining a nonprofit board allows you to make a difference in your community while supporting a cause you believe in, provides satisfaction that your skills are helping a nonprofit's mission, and offers the opportunity to put your values into action. It is a rewarding experience, that is also time-intensive and demanding. Review these key questions before joining a board to ensure that board service is right for you. If you are appointing new board members, be certain that you do not have any hesitations about your prospective board members' answers to the questions below.

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What type of volunteer work is most fulfilling for you?

You must be committed to the mission of an organization before deciding to join its board of directors. Boards have a huge impact on an organization, yet do not routinely take part in direct volunteering. (Start-up boards are an exception to this rule.) If you prefer a more hands-on volunteer opportunity, board service might not be the best way to get involved.

Before joining a board, it is crucial to consider your expectations for board service and how you can personally make an impact on the organization. Think about the role you might play on the board. What skills do you already bring to the table, and what skills do you want to develop? Do you bring financial expertise? Community connections? Lived experience? Sensitivity to and tolerance of differing views? Facilitation skills? Do you have experience with other similar organizations? It may help to think about what kind of legacy you want to create for a board and an organization before you join.

What is your motivation?

In order to be an asset to the nonprofit and its board and find your own fulfillment, take time to consider your motivations for serving on a nonprofit board. What type of organization are you most passionate about, want to serve, and in what capacity?

Serving on a board can be fulfilling and enjoyable but different from the satisfaction you may receive from directly helping someone in need through serving in a soup kitchen or assisting in building a house. In your role as a board member, you help set the direction for the organization and have a longer-term impact on the organization's mission and the community it serves, but you will likely not frequently directly interact with clients.

Board service is a volunteer activity for most nonprofits, yet it is different from other traditional volunteer roles. Do you have the ability to listen, analyze, think strategically, and work well with people advancing the big picture? If so, then board service is for you.

How much time can you devote to board work?

Board members are legally required to fulfill their fiduciary duties, which may require a considerable time commitment. The amount of time varies by organization and the current realities affecting it, but more than simply planning to attend meetings is required. Board members must review financial statements and meeting materials, as well as prepare for and attend committee meetings on a regular basis. Generative and strategic work is also paramount to board leadership and takes additional time.

You will need to be prepared to ask questions, take responsibility and follow through on any given assignment, contribute financially according to your personal means, open doors in the community, advocate for the organization, and undertake regular individual and board evaluation activities.

Serving on a committee before joining the full board can be a good way to learn more about the organization and prepare yourself for the amount of work participating on a board can entail.

Are you able and willing to assist with fundraising?

One of the responsibilities of the board is to ensure that the organization has adequate financial resources to carry out its mission. Many organizations expect board members to make a personally significant contribution and also solicit funds from others. Be prepared to make connections and introductions to donors, attend fundraising events, and send personal and thank you notes.

Are you patient and collegial when working as a team? Are you looking forward to meeting people outside of your usual professional and social circles?

Boards of directors must work together to build consensus and govern an organization. If you work better alone without input from a large

group, board service may not be right for you. Additionally, the [highest performing boards](#) comprise a mix of professional skills, lived experiences, and community insight and connections to bring a variety of viewpoints to a discussion. Expect board members to represent a number of different industries, backgrounds, and perspectives.

Do you understand the roles and responsibilities of being a board member?

Board members have a number of obligations — including those that are legally sanctioned — to an organization. To familiarize yourself with the responsibilities board service entails, take a look at our most popular publications, [Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards](#) and [Purpose-Driven Board Leadership](#).

Is there an opportunity for you to make a difference in the organization?

Identify your role on the board. Do you bring financial expertise, lived experience, community insight or connections? Before joining a board, ask yourself whether you feel that your work on the board will make a positive impact on the organization.

What do you need to know about the organization's finances, or the board's process or culture?

You can learn a lot about the financial state of the nonprofit by requesting to see the organization's most recent financial statements and audit. Be sure to read any narratives as they provide useful details about the organization, such as its nonprofit status, methods of accounting for contributions, and any pending lawsuits that might have a material financial impact.

Do the financial statements include budget variance information? Ask how cash-flow issues are managed. If you are not familiar with nonprofit balance sheets, you may be surprised by the scarcity of financial resources in the sector. If you are concerned, ask how long the organization has functioned with its current level of assets, what the organization has in reserves, and whether it has a reserve policy in place.

Remember, this is a nonprofit; you can expect a different revenue model than you see in a for-profit environment, but if the financial situation alarms you, it's your responsibility to ask questions.

Just as important as the financial health of an organization is the board's governance and culture, which can mean the difference between an uplifting board service experience and one that feels like a chore. To avoid the latter, ask how well board members get along and whether they can respectfully disagree with each other in search of the best decisions for the organization. What is the board's style of interaction? Does the board and chief executive have a constructive partnership built on trust and a clear division of duties? Are board meetings productive, yet fun? Do all board members feel their voices are heard and valued? What are the strengths and challenges of the board? Does the board undertake a board self-evaluation to continuously seek to improve? These questions will help you get a better sense of the board and whether it fits with your style and expectations.

Do you feel comfortable with the overall health of the organization?

Board members have a legal obligation to the organization they govern. If you are not confident the organization is being managed well, either by the chief executive or the current board members, and believe your association with the organization could put you at risk, it may be time to take a step back.