

December 2018
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The Humble Board Member Bob Harris, CAE

Is there one quality that is most respected among board members? A quality that supports continuous success? Something that enhances a culture of trust?

Humility is the trait that best positions a director for sustainable effectiveness on a board.

“When you step into leadership, success is no longer measured by your ability to do the work, but by your ability to set the stage for others to do the work,” offers Heather Breen, Director of Governance, Planning, and Engagement at the San Diego County Bar Association. She continues, “The most successful leaders welcome input and take a step back to allow others to shine.”

A trio of past board officers shared their experiences with a freshmen class of incoming directors. Here’s what they said about leadership and humility.

- Don’t be afraid to be self-deprecating. The person who might belittle him or herself, preferring to be undervalued or excessively modest, is likely to have the best experience. A director who hoodwinks the board or professes to know everything will have limited respect and success.
- Don’t take yourself too serious.
- It is best if you approach leadership from the perspective of positioning the board or your committee for success. It should not be about personal or conflicted interests.



- Though you may have a title of “director” or “officer” on the board, it is not about the title --- it’s about the members.
- You don’t have to be right, or win every discussion. You have to produce results that advance the mission.
- Plan to be a mentor. Demonstrate an interest in the growth and success of every person on the team.
- Respect and work within the existing framework of mission, bylaws, budget and strategic plan.
- Time will fly. Achieve as much as you can in the first three months, then the rest of year will be easier.

Their advice about humility reminds me of the book *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. It tells the story of a 10-year-old boy who was born with distorted facial features. It suggests that when it comes down to everything that is important, “If you have a choice between being right and being kind, choose kind.”

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Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.