

90 DAYS

Joining a Nonprofit Board Is More Than a Labor of Love

You might accept the nomination out of solidarity with the cause or as a resume-builder, but there's work to be done.

By ERIN CHAMBERS

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Since so few of them pay these days, joining the board of a nonprofit is usually more about passion—or resume building—than making a little extra money on the side. And regardless of the organization's mission, Terrie Temkin, founder of Florida-based nonprofit consultancy CoreStrategies for Nonprofits, says all nonprofits are simply looking for "bright, dynamic minds" to help get their organizations to the next level.

Your First 90 Days

Follow up on standard public relations efforts. Connect with the organization's public relations department immediately to ensure they have an updated bio and photo for any standard press releases. Jim Kristie, editor of Philadelphia-based *Directors & Boards* magazine since 1981, also suggests reaching out to one's personal network of alumni and business connections with a more casual announcement in an alumni newsletter or personal Web site. "It would be natural to do some self promotion by looking for ways to leverage that new board position in your own network," he says.

Don't blow off the orientation. This is especially important if there are multiple new appointments. It's a mistake to assume that all boards function the same way, says Ms. Temkin. "You need to be there," she says. And with so few board meetings these days—many organizations have ramped down to meeting just once per quarter—new directors need to take advantage of every face-to-face opportunity with fellow board members.

The first board meeting: Observe the group dynamic. "[A] new board member has to find out where the power lies on the board and where the force of gravity is," says Mr. Kristie who serves on several nonprofit boards. "It's like any other group. There are cliques, there are leaders, and then there are other directors who aren't pulling their weight." Much of a director's first board meeting should be about deciphering who's who.

Look outside the boardroom. Find out if any of the directors live or work in your area, and make to plans to meet for lunch. "Try to ride to the airport together," if you're both flying in from another city, says Mr. Kristie. Ms. Temkin advises scheduling a one-on-one session with the organization's chief administrator directly. Casual conversations can be more informative than formal meetings when trying to understand the unique challenges involved in running a nonprofit.

Ask questions. Experts agree that the primary function of any board, nonprofit or corporate, is to ask the tough questions. "Be somebody who asks questions, who doesn't take things at face value." Says Ms. Temkin. "What you really require from directors is a community perspective. Someone who is out in the field hearing and doing and seeing things."

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