

Successful board members are not merely names on a letterhead: they are committed to their organizations' cause and willing to devote significant time and mental energy.

Here's how to make your mark.

1. Prepare

Before accepting a seat on any board of directors, ask for a job description, a list of meetings and conferences board members must attend, and the names of at least two successful current directors. Ask these directors for an honest estimate of the time they devote. Also find out if the organization is experiencing any unusual situations, such as extraordinary personality conflicts or financial difficulty.

Let your employer know you're considering accepting a board position. Ask for a commitment to allow you to devote the time and resources necessary to do a good job. If you encounter reluctance, remind your boss that the experience will probably enhance your skills and supply valuable contacts.

Also talk to your spouse: or others who lay claim to your time:. Be up front about the extent of commitment required of you and your spouse. Some organizations will expect both of you to appear at social events. Most importantly, decide whether you want to make the organization a priority in your life.

2. Orient Yourself

A good board orientation should familiarize directors with the organization's constitution and bylaws, purpose and objectives, and operating procedures. If no formal program exists, ask for this information and also lists of volunteer committees and staff contacts. Verify meeting schedules during your term and get detailed information about how to execute your duties.

3. Strive for Opportunity

As a board director, you represent the organization's membership and often, the industry as a whole. Don't let a personal agenda cloud your duty to the group. Some board members are elected by a specific geographic region or section of the membership. In most associations, this does not mean you are bound to represent them. Consider the needs of the membership at large when judging issues.

4. Be Creative

During your term on the board, problems - even crises - will inevitably arise. Nothing will earn your place in prosperity surer than proposing creative solutions that bring results.

5. Think Before You Speak

Because you are closer to the association and its inner workings than most of your fellow members, you must be careful of what you say and to whom. Whether speaking to an old friend or a member of the press, your comments about the association will be taken seriously, perhaps even considered policy. Don't say - or do - anything that could compromise the association or your position.

6. Establish Good Relationships with Staff

Because the organization is their full time focus, the Fair Manager and other staff members usually have a comprehensive knowledge of important issues. Don't look at them as adversaries. They are there to help you and to make you look good.

By building strong relations, you'll gain valuable insight, advice, and support.

7. Be Responsible

Members of the Board of Directors can be held individually or collectively liable if the legality of an association action is challenged. Consider all proposed actions prudently and seek counsel if necessary.

Further, honor deadlines and fulfill your commitments to the best of your ability, just as you would in the rest of your professional life. If it's not incentive enough that you've pledged to do this, remember that your peers will be judging your work.

8. Work Constructively

Strive to build a stronger organization that reflects current and future member needs. Strenuously avoid becoming mired in personality conflicts or power plays..

9. Behave Honorably

Obviously, you should avoid any unethical activities, either on the board or in your professional and personal life that could expose the association to public criticism.

10. Do Your Homework

Study background documents and key reports and don't be shy if you need more information to make a decision. The chief elected officer, committee chairs, and staff are all excellent resources. Hours devoted to fully understanding important issues, is time well spent.

11. Use Time Wisely

Your role as a director is to guide the industry or profession. To do this effectively, you must address the major problems facing the organization and leave administrative details to others. At board meetings, contribute actively but respect the time of others. Stick to the agenda and make all comments short, constructive and to the point.