

## How Business Leaders Can Get the Most from Volunteering for a Nonprofit Board

By Hardy Smith

Business leaders are favourite targets for nonprofit organizations seeking board members. However, after serving for a short period of time, they often become frustrated with their board experience.

This frustration can be avoided if nonprofits would heed some solid advice from the for-profit world.

Recently executives with extensive experience working with nonprofits participated in a nationwide survey to identify a business perspective for creating effective nonprofit boards.

Ironically, the survey project was initiated as a result of participants in a training session for nonprofit leaders being asked to identify their most pressing problem. They answered loudly and nearly in unison, “Why don’t board members do what they’re supposed to do?”

However the room quickly fell silent when the audience was countered with this question: “Have you asked or told board members what you would like from them?” It was a wake up call. Organizations with board performance issues were confronted with the fact that they might be contributing more to their problem than they realized.

This response confirmed the need to solicit opinions on causes of frustration being felt by business leaders in their relationships with nonprofit boards.

Survey participants reflected a wide variety of occupations and interests. Included were top corporate executives, business owners, political leaders, university presidents, doctors, attorneys, engineers, and management level leaders.

In addition to getting responses to the priority question – *Why don’t board members do what they’re supposed to do?* – the survey included four other key questions for collecting advice from business and community leaders:

- When asked to serve on a nonprofit board, what motivates you to say yes?
- Other than time, what would be some reasons you would turn down a board position?
- As a board member, what is your biggest criticism related to organizations and relations with their boards?
- How can organizations be more effective in utilizing their board members?

The results reveal candid opinions on relationships with nonprofits.

Service minded business leaders shared taking their personal involvement with nonprofit organizations very seriously. Their responses revealed common problems they feel strongly about, along with possible solutions.

Executives surveyed emphatically recommended that organizations should first closely examine their policies, procedures, and practices before any criticism is directed to board members.

Of course many organizations enjoy highly effective, very engaged boards. But for those who don't, and for those who want to make sure their board member relationships remain strong, paying attention to what these board members have to say – as well as listening to their own board members – is imperative.

Six recurring themes were identified as the foundation for most issues and solutions: connectivity, no surprises, importance of time, improved communication, accountability, and organizational focus.

A large majority of business executives responding said they want to feel a personal connection to an organization's cause or issue before getting involved. Very few said they got involved just because the cause was a good one. It is vital that organizations invite the right people by taking time to understand their interests and abilities. In other words, organizations should pre-qualify board candidates for compatibility.

Furthermore, organizations should be sure to communicate effectively with board prospects about the expectations of their role. Those expectations should be clearly laid out and agreed to by board prospects. No surprises later. If they are going to be asked to raise or give money, they need to know that up front. *This is a major issue!*

Organizations must recognize the importance of time to their board members. Despite being asked to list reasons other than time for turning down a board position, many of the survey participants still gave that as a reason for saying no. Clearly time is something those surveyed feel strongly about! All activities must be run as efficiently as possible with no time wasted. They must accept the fact that an otherwise good board prospect just might be too busy to participate, and a "no" could actually be the best response to an invitation for filling a board position.

Many of the issues mentioned could be resolved through improved organization-board communication. It is hard to have a positive relationship if someone feels good communication is missing. And remember, listening is a critical part of effective communication. Board members will question their involvement, and commitment, when they feel they are not being listened to.

Survey participants firmly believe that accountability of board members should be a priority. They are clearly frustrated by non-performers. Organizations failing to deal with this issue are missing needed performance and at the same time risk losing board members who are productive.

Other major reasons cited for declining a board invitation or for leaving a board position include nonprofits being run without an organized focus, reputation issues, financial questions, or staff who does not project a professional image.

Organizations experiencing difficulty in trying to recruit or engage board members need to undertake an honest evaluation of themselves and their board relationships. Addressing the concerns raised by this survey will help them create an atmosphere conducive to attracting and retaining committed board members.

If they want more effective boards and more engaged board members, nonprofits should accept the results-oriented focus of successful business leaders participating in this survey.

Business and community leaders who desire a more positive, productive experience from their volunteer board service can communicate the insights gained from this survey to help avoid and eliminate frustration with the nonprofits they wish to serve.

**About the Author**

Hardy Smith conducted the *Why Don't Board Members Do What They're Supposed to Do?* survey to help organizations maximize relationships with their board members. As a speaker and consultant, he creates high performance success by powering up teams for remarkable results. Learn more about Hardy by visiting: [www.hardysmith.com](http://www.hardysmith.com)