



Why Don't Board Members Do What They're Supposed to Do?

A board-member survey reveals ways to create a stronger organization.

By Hardy Smith

When nonprofit executives in a training session were asked to share their most pressing problem, their response was quick: "Board members don't do what they're supposed to do."

The trainer responded, "Do your board members know what they're supposed to be doing?" Many participants were surprised to realize they were causing the problem by not clarifying expectations.

Shortly after that session, the trainer surveyed board members throughout the nation to learn how organizations could be more effective in engaging their boards. He asked board members these key questions:

- When asked to serve on a nonprofit board, what motivates you to say yes?
- What are some reasons that you would turn down a board position?

- What's your main criticism of organizations' relations with their boards?
- How can organizations be more effective in utilizing their board members?

Paying attention to what survey respondents had to say, as well as listening to your own board members, will go a long way toward strengthening your organization. Here are the themes that emerged from the study, along with tips for putting those ideas to use:

Connectivity

A large majority of respondents say they want to feel a personal connection to an organization's cause before getting involved. Very few said they got involved just because the cause was a good one.

Board members are frustrated by non-performers.

Be sure you have the right people by taking time to understand their interests, motivations, and abilities. Pre-qualify all board candidates for compatibility.

Time

Despite being asked to list "reasons other than time" for turning down a board position, many survey participants still gave "time" as a reason for saying no.

Board members want activities to run efficiently, with no time wasted. Send board members their meeting agendas early. Begin and end meetings according to a clear, prearranged schedule. Also recognize that a good board prospect just might be too busy to participate, and a "no" could be the best response to your invitation.

Communication

Survey participants listed communication as one of the greatest barriers to an effective board. Board members will question their involvement if they feel they're not being

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A “no” could be the best response to your invitation.

heard or if they don't know what's expected. They want to know their role before they join a board. If they'll need to raise or donate money, tell them up front. People who were asked to sign an agreement before joining a board tended to be the most satisfied with their board experience. (See “Reciprocal Board Agreements: What Do Board Members Give? What Do They Receive in Return?” in *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 28, No. 1, www.snpo.org/members.)

Accountability

Survey participants believe strongly that all board members should be accountable for their performance. They're frustrated by non-performers. Organizations failing to deal with this issue risk losing their most productive board members.

Insights from this survey will help you keep board members engaged.

Other Issues

Other major reasons for declining a board invitation or for leaving a board position include:

- The organization is run poorly, without an organized focus.
- The organization's reputation isn't good.
- There are financial questions about the organization.
- Staff members don't project a professional image.

Insights from this survey will help you answer the question: *Why don't board members do what they're supposed to do?* It will also help avoid future problems and ensure that valuable board members stay engaged. ■

Hardy Smith (www.hardysmith.com) 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, he helps connect nonprofit organizations with people and profit.



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If you have any questions, contact Jason Chmura at jchmura@snpo.org.