



ON BOARD

A resource for not-for-profit board members

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Becoming Engaged as a New Board Member

By Thomas W. Mesaros, CFRE

There are tens of thousands of not-for-profit organizations throughout Washington State and if you are a new board member at one of them, you are not alone. Here are a few practical steps for you to take so that this becomes one of the most rewarding experiences of your volunteer or community life:

1. Show up!!
 - a. Attend the meetings of the board. Calendar out the scheduled board meetings and do everything you can to guard those dates from being taken over by other tasks. The organization needs your talents and insights and cannot utilize them if you are not there to provide them.
 - b. Join a committee. Much of the work of board members happens during committee meetings. Be an active committee member taking assignments and fulfilling assignments. You will learn much about the organization and you will give much more through your increased knowledge gained through committee work.
2. Learn!!
 - a. Orient yourself. If the organization has a new board member orientation program, attend it. If they don't, schedule a time with the executive director or president & CEO to learn more about the mission, programs, staffing, finances, challenges and strategic plan of the organization.
 - b. Meet with the board chair. Set up a meeting with the board chair and learn about his/her perspective on the organization and the operation of the board.
 - c. Find a mentor. Discover a fellow board member who has been a board member for a few more years than you. Introduce yourself and ask that person to join you for coffee or lunch to learn how he/she approaches his/her work as a board member. Seek advice and counsel from other board members, but use your own knowledge, experiences and expertise when deciding on issues or opportunities.
 - d. Become knowledgeable. Learn about the community need for the organization, how it fulfills that need through its programs and the cost to meet that need monthly and annually. And of course discover why that is important for our community.
3. Advocate!!
 - a. Tell others. Do not keep it a secret that you are involved in this organization. Communicate your involvement to as many people as possible, without being

overly pushy or obnoxious about it. You should be proud of your service and eager to spread the word about the good things the organization is doing to serve the community.

- b. Give your money. As a board member, you must be a financial investor in this organization. It is not about what you cannot give, it is about what you can give. Be as generous as you can be and do so cheerfully.
 - c. Ask others to join you in supporting the organization. When the time comes for participating in annual giving, or a special event, invite your friends and business associates to participate with you in supporting the community through giving financially to the organization. Board members have to be leaders in this, mostly because as a board member you are a leader of the organization.
4. Outside resources!!
- a. The United Way in your local community probably has several free training resources available for new board members. Call them and take advantages of the opportunities it offers to learn more about your role as a board member. In the greater Seattle area, you can reach United Way of King County at 206-461-5014. You can also click [here](#) to see their upcoming trainings online.
 - b. BoardSource is a national organization focused only on good governance within not-for-profit organizations (www.boardsource.org). It has quality resources available online that would be useful to any new or veteran board member.
 - c. NACD (National Association of Corporate Directors) was formed to provide corporate board members with guidance and insights as they lead for-profit companies. It now has a strong not-for-profit component that not-for-profit board members find useful (www.nacdonline.org).
 - d. Find a board member from another organization. You may have a friend, acquaintance or co-worker who has had a wonderful experience as a board member within a not-for-profit organization. Use that person as a resource as you learn and grow as a board member. This individual will bring additional insights and perspective to your experience and become a sounding board for you as you face challenges and opportunities in your board member role. Of course, keep the confidential items confidential when discussing your own organization with outsiders.

I hope these few words provide insights and ideas for you as you work to serve as a board member thus enriching the community and enriching your own life as well.

About the Author

Tom Mesaros is Senior Counsel with The Alford Group, a professional consulting partner focused exclusively on helping not-for-profit organizations improve their effectiveness. Founded in 1979, The Alford Group serves more than 90 not-for-profit organizations in 20 states annually, assisting them with strategic planning, fundraising strategies, data base management and executive search projects. From 1995 through 2014, Tom served as The Alford Group's President & CEO. You can reach Tom via email at TMesaros@alford.com.

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