

Nonprofit Strategies



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Finding the right fit for nonprofit boards

By Barry VanderKelen

If you're interested in serving on a nonprofit board of directors, I encourage you to introduce yourself to an organization and then determine your willingness to commit by doing one or more of the following:

- Volunteer. Become known as a reliable person who is willing to do almost anything the organization needs.
- Lead. If there is a particular need at the organization, step in and meet the need.
- Network. Meet the current leadership of the organization. Give them opportunities to determine if you can be trusted with the future of the organization.
- Donate. A pattern of giving, regardless of amount, is more important than a one-time big gift. All of these actions demonstrate commitment, which makes you an attractive candidate for the board. Additionally, they will allow you to get to know the organization

better and determine if it's a good fit.

Everyone volunteers for personal reasons.

Some serve because the organization is focused on helping people overcome a particular challenge, like one a relative or friend is facing. Others serve to connect with a social group or develop a new skill. Clearly identifying your motivation is essential because it will sustain your efforts for the longer term.

It's best if you have a passion for the cause, too. Nonprofit organizations can be complicated with their multiple funding sources, restrictions on grants and gifts, and the orientation of providing programs and services. It takes new board members a few meetings to begin to understand the strengths and opportunities. The disruption of short board tenure is costly in terms of organizational momentum and team building on the board.

Be realistic about what commitment you are willing to make. An honest appraisal will serve yourself and the organization well.

Discussing expectations —both yours and the organization's — is a vital. Some questions to ask: What's the biggest challenge facing the organization, and how is the board meeting it? What role can I play in advancing the organization? How does the work of the board happen? How many committees do board members serve on? What financial commitment does the organization expect of board members? If you don't feel comfortable setting limits, perhaps you're not talking to the right organization. The same is true if the organization is not clear about its expectations.

Nonprofit organizations need your skills and abilities. The key is to find the right fit of skills and expectations; when you do, everyone wins—you, the nonprofit and county residents.

Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@slocf.org.