* What excites you the most about the organization’s work in the world?
* Why are you interested in serving on the board?
* What do you want to accomplish by serving?
* What are you, as a board member, committed to creating?
* How is this board service helping you achieve your own personal goals?
* What legacy do you want to leave by virtue of serving on this board?

Seven Questions to Ask Before You Join a Board of Directors

By Nathan Garber

It is a sad fact that if you have been invited to join a board of directors, the reason might not have anything to do with your skills, knowledge, abilities, or even the size of your bank account. There is a good chance the only reason you were asked is because someone on the board thought you had some spare time on your hands. The importance with which the board is viewed, can be seen by the amount of effort dedicated to board recruitment, orientation, and training. In far too many nonprofits, board recruitment is a process of finding the nearest warm body without regard to the organization’s needs or the role of the board.

Many board members do not know what they are getting into when they join a board. I have seen boards in which one or more directors actually disagreed with the organization’s mission, had obvious but undeclared conflicts of interest, or knew they would not be able to attend most of the board meetings. It would be correct to blame the organization for recruiting and electing such members but don’t forget the directors accepted the nomination and agreed to serve.

If you are invited to join a board, what can you do to be sure there is a good match and to make the experience worthwhile for both the organization and for you? One way is to make sure you know the answers to these seven questions before you accept the nomination.

1. **What is the organization’s mission?** The mission statement should explain who the organization serves and what good the organization intends to do for them. If you do not understand or are not fully committed to the organization’s mission, you should not consider joining the board.

2. **What is the role of the board?** What an organization needs from the board changes both with the type of organization and over time. Naturally, the activities of the board change too. The recruitment of board members should be based upon the current and
anticipated tasks in which the board will be engaged. A board focused on strategic planning, policy-making and evaluation will require members with different skills than one engaged primarily in fund-raising or program delivery.

3. **What are the board and committee meeting schedules?** The organization should provide you with a list of board meeting dates for the coming year. Even if committees don’t meet on a regular schedule, they should tell you how frequently they meet. Before joining a board, you need to be reasonably certain you can attend at least 80% of all meetings. To be sure I won’t be wasting my time by showing up, I’d also like to know about the attendance record of current board and/or committee members and how many meetings did not achieve a quorum.

4. **What is the organization’s financial condition?** The organization should provide you with its most recent financial statements and current budget. It should also tell you if it has experienced or is anticipating any financial problems. You may want to think twice before joining a board with a history of deficits -- or you may consider it a personal challenge to help them become financially stable. In either case, you need to know before you make a commitment to serve.

5. **What are the organization’s major fundraising and program goals for the next three years?** The organization should be able to provide a recent strategic plan and explain its planning process. If it has not done any recent planning or evaluation, you need to know how the organization knows its programs and services are serving some useful purpose.

6. **What orientation and board development activities are planned?** The organization should have a process for introducing new directors to the organization’s history, bylaws, current issues, financial situation, plans and governance process. If their only orientation is to hand you a big binder and expect you to absorb it on your own, there is a strong likelihood this will not be a high-performing board of directors.

7. **Exactly why are you being asked to serve on this board?** The organization should be able to explain what skills and experience it hopes you will bring to the board as well as the time and financial commitment it expects from you. If they can’t give you a reason other than someone recommended you, you had better expect most of the other directors will be asking themselves why they ever agreed to join the board.

There are many other questions you might ask, but if you can’t get satisfactory answers to the above, it is fair to conclude the organization needs some serious board development work but doesn’t know it. If that’s the case, I suggest you choose one of two courses of action:

1. If you care enough for the organization’s mission, like the people on the board, and are up to the challenge, you might still want to join the board, making it clear you see your primary role as that of building a more effective board. This path will likely lead to much frustration but might result in a stronger organization; or
2. Respectfully decline the invitation. You might want to advise them you would reconsider at some time in the future, provided they put some effort into strengthening their board processes and can demonstrate some progress.

Accepting the responsibilities of a director of a nonprofit organization should not be taken lightly. Effective governance requires effort and time. If the board is not prepared for this, it’s probably not a good place to be.