

# Women get on board

Taking a seat on a non-profit board requires passion—and a game plan.



More non-profit organizations are recognizing the value of diversity on their boards and are committed to including more women members.

After all, non-profit boards that reflect the diversity of their constituencies are better able to serve them and carry out the organizational mission. And more funders are asking about board makeup during the grant-making process, favoring non-profits that are inclusive of different groups.

Non-profits have made significant progress in increasing the number of women directors in their ranks—and are well ahead of their corporate counterparts. Women make up 53% of non-profit boards members overall, according to BoardSource's 2021 report.<sup>1</sup>

"Being on a board can be a great learning experience for women," explains Brianna Williamson, director and private wealth advisor at BMO Wealth Management. "It can teach you valuable skills, particularly if it's a governing board that makes strategic decisions for the direction of the non-profit."

It's also a great way to meet other professionals, both in your field and beyond.

"There's valuable networking that takes place with board work that can advance a woman's career," Williamson notes.

If you've considered getting involved on a board, this is the time to do it. Your involvement is being sought out, and there are many worthy non-profit organizations that could benefit from your talents and skills. Here's what to know about serving as a board member.

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## Understand what's expected

Sure, there might be social aspects of board participation, like networking at the annual gala or hitting the links at a golf fundraiser. But board work adds to your responsibilities, which requires you to have some bandwidth in your schedule. If you feel this might not be the time to take on new responsibilities, trust your instinct and wait for the right moment.

In addition to board meetings—typically four a year—you'll also be asked to join a committee such as finance, marketing, or compensation to oversee a particular aspect of the non-profit's management. For this, you'll be asked to participate in other meetings or calls throughout the year.

Non-profits also rely on their board members to make a financial contribution. Typically, this comes in the form of a "give/get" arrangement. The organization expects you to personally contribute a certain amount each year and perhaps even buy a table at the annual fundraiser, which is the "give." The "get" means you agree to solicit contributions from your network.

"Some organizations ask for a specific minimum or ask that the non-profit is in the top three organizations you give to," Williamson says. "This is something you need to clarify before joining."

If the organization isn't forthcoming about an exact amount, take the initiative and spell out what you can personally contribute and what skills you bring to the table. If that amount is less than the non-profit was expecting, ask if you can make up the difference in another way.

Take the fundraising aspect of board service seriously. In addition to helping raise funds directly, a financial commitment from members also helps an organization secure other funding. Many foundations have giving guidelines that require 100% board participation, which demonstrates buy-in from internal stakeholders.

## Find your match

If you're ready to sign on for the duties of a board member, the next step is to find an organization that will benefit from your passion, commitment, and skills.

"In my experience, people usually find out about board membership opportunities through word of mouth," explains Williamson. "Usually someone in their network is recruiting for board positions."

Look for organizations whose missions will inspire you to share your gifts, Williamson advises. If you love music, an organization working on animal rescue probably isn't the right fit. How else can you garner the enthusiasm for the work that's required or ask your friends to open their wallets?

In fact, passion for the mission ranked as the top quality that boards seek when recruiting new members, according to BoardSource's *Leading with Intent* survey.

One way to test your interest in an organization's mission is through volunteer work, Williamson suggests. Getting involved with a non-profit could lead you to take on a bigger commitment. Current board members can provide you with insights into whether the board is actively seeking new members. You might even be recruited to serve on a board if your passion shines through.

Some non-profits seek out candidates who have specific talents needed on the board. You could be an attractive candidate to a board that lacks your particular skillset.

"Oftentimes women in banking and finance are recruited to join the finance subcommittees because organizations are looking for individuals who will help them make prudent financial decisions," Williamson notes.

Strong fundraising skills are also in demand, as are your ability to promote the organization in your network.

## Protect yourself

As a board member, you have the duties of governance and oversight. Because of this, non-profits protect their trustees by carrying a directors and officers liability insurance policy, known as "D&O," although smaller non-profits might not have this coverage. If they don't have it, think carefully about joining, Williamson says.

## Bottom line

As more non-profits embrace diversity by increasing the number of women on their boards, there has never been a better time to consider volunteer work or board service. Before diving in, make sure you've thought about the non-profit missions that inspire you and then take time to find the right match. You will want to be clear about what's expected of you, so you can focus your passion, commitment and leadership skills on the work ahead.



<sup>1</sup> "Leading with Intent," BoardSource Index of Non-profit Board Practices, 2021 report.

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