

A Board Member's Approach to the Job

*One of the reasons a board member's job is so difficult is that "the job" is essentially a group responsibility. In fact, it is hard to discuss how an individual is to approach a group task. Yet each board member has a responsibility to come with an effective mind-set, to carry out his or her part of preparation and participation and to take responsibility for the group. These are not always easy tasks. Here is some advice on the frame of mind and individual preparations necessary for any board member to play an effective role in creating a productive board. (This advice is adapted from *Your Roles and Responsibilities as a Board Member*, Carver Guide No. 2, pp. 13-17.)*

- 1** Be prepared to participate responsibly. Do your homework. Come prepared to work (sometimes the work is to listen) agree and disagree as your values dictate and accept the group decision as legitimate even if not – in your opinion – correct. It is not acceptable, for example to have opinions but not express them.
- 2** Remember that your identity is with the entire ownership, not with the staff or with a single constituency of the ownership. If you identify too closely with staff, you run the risk that you might be talking to them more than to those who you should be in ongoing conversation with: the owners. Be a microcosm of your ownership, not a shadow of the staff. And even though you may personally identify with certain constituencies of the ownership more than others, as a board member you represent the entire ownership. There is no way a board can be big enough to have a spokesperson for every legitimate interest, so in a moral sense you must stand for them all.
- 3** Be responsible for group behavior and productivity. Although doing your own job as a single board member is important, you must also shoulder the potentially unfamiliar burden of being responsible for the group. If you are part of a group that doesn't get its job done, meddles in administration or breaks its own rules, you are culpable.
- 4** Be a proactive board member. You are not a board member to hear reports. You are a board member to make governance decisions. Although it may be necessary at times to get data through reports, don't let that cast you in a passive role. Even when you are receiving education, do so as an active participant, searching doggedly for the wisdom that will enable good board decisions.
- 5** Honor divergent opinions without being intimidated by them. You are obligated to register your honest opinion on issues the board takes up, but other board members are obligated to speak up as well. Encourage your colleagues to express their opinions without allowing your own to be submerged by those who are louder or more insistent.
- 6** Use your special expertise to inform your colleagues' wisdom. For example, a board member who is an accountant can certainly help board members understand what financial jeopardy looks like or what indicators of financial health to watch carefully. He or she shouldn't however, assume personal responsibility for ensuring financial soundness.
- 7** Tolerate issues that cannot be settled quickly. Resolving short-term concrete matters may give you a feeling of completion but is likely to involve you in the wrong issues.
- 8** Don't tolerate putting off the big issues forever. The really big issues will often be too intimidating for you to resolve comfortably. Yet putting off a decision is itself a decision. Don't tolerate board inaction as a form of decision making.
- 9** Support the board's final choice. No matter which way you voted, you are obligated to support the board's choice. This obligation doesn't mean you must pretend to agree with that choice. What you must support is the legitimacy of the choice that you still don't agree with.
- 10** Don't mistake form for substance. Don't confuse having a public relations committee with having good public relations. Don't confuse having financial reports with having sound finances. Don't confuse having a token constituent board member with having sufficient input.
- 11** Remember that the organization is not there for you. Being an owner representative is very different from seeing the organization as your personal possession. The organization does not exist to satisfy board members' needs to feel useful, self-actualized, involved or entertained. Your job is to faithfully serve the ownership of the organization.
- 12** Support the chair in board discipline. Although the board as a whole is responsible for its own discipline, it will have charged the chair with a special role in the group's confronting its own process. Don't make the chair's job harder; ask rather what you can do to make it easier.

THE MODEL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COUNCIL AND STAFF

What the governing body expects from the staff	What the staff expects from the governing body
No surprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad policy direction as opposed to involvement in day-to-day decisions
Communicate in lay terms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respectful consideration for professional judgment and the staff personally
Be conscious of community values and sensitive to them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust that staff's motives are oriented towards the public good
Make sound recommendations (reliable, professional, factual, unemotional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide freedom and resources to carry out our mission
Demonstrate commitment to the organization and the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak as a body
Understand the value of citizen trust of our local government	
Obligations of the governing body to the staff. What will the governing body contribute to the staff?	Obligations of the staff to the governing body. What will the staff contribute to the governing body?
Back up the staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do our job skillfully and with integrity
Trust staff's recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the best professional recommendations
Respect staff expertise, training, and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage community input
Provide latitude in carrying out goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a professional demeanor
Educate the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate our commitment to the city and community
Communicate our priorities as a body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify policy issues and take them to the governing body
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be responsive to governing body needs and requests
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the best practices and benchmark with high quality peer institutions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a range of options and explain consequences of policy recommendations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educate the council

