

Are You Serving or Sitting on Your Nonprofit's Board of Directors?

I have heard it said both ways. Some say they serve on a nonprofit board of directors, while others say they sit on a nonprofit board of directors. At first glance, it sounds the same, but there is a world of difference between them. Many executive directors lament over the question of how they can get their board members engaged. In reality, they are asking how they can get their members to participate; to do what they need. Many factors contribute to creating an effective, high-performing board of directors which begins with engagement. Before discussing these factors, it is interesting to consider the two verbs. One is active (serve), and the other is passive (sit). I do not believe people are aware of what these words suggest when they say to someone that they serve or sit on a nonprofit board. Honestly, I think it is a random choice of words.

However, I think it is an interesting irony that the difference between serve and sit is precisely the difference between the board members who are engaged and those who are not. As with many things in life, and this is true on many nonprofit boards, eighty percent of the work is performed by twenty percent of the people. I wonder if, subconsciously, those who say they serve are the twenty percent who are engaged and active, and those who say they sit are the eighty percent who are not engaged. Are the sitters the ones who consistently miss board meetings? Are they the ones who chair board committees that never meet? Are they the ones that do not make a meaningful, personal financial contribution to the organization? Maybe they are, and perhaps they are not.

The more significant point of my lighthearted play with the two words is that nonprofit boards need to perform a self-assessment of their performance. One of the most inequitable things a board can do is to expect more of their executive director (and reflect it in an evaluation)

than they expect of themselves. One of the ten widely accepted responsibilities of a nonprofit board is to build a competent board (see, *Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards* by Richard T. Ingram, BoardSource, 2015), which includes performing board self-assessments to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement. Typical categories on an assessment can address board recruitment, board meetings, board orientation, strategic direction, financial oversight, program oversight, board structure, board member satisfaction, board training, board terms, board leadership, and more.

Board members want to serve. They typically join a board with passion, enthusiasm, and an eagerness to contribute. When things change in their family, career, or health that affect their ability to serve effectively, they should be forthright and honest with the organization so they can step down (before the expiration of their term limit) and allow someone else whose situation is conducive to serving to come on board. Communication must be a two-way street between the organization and the board member. It has to be open, honest, and timely. If a board member is sitting and not serving, the board chair needs to initiate a conversation if the board member does not.

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