

Nonprofits

# From Entry-Level to Leadership: How to Join a Nonprofit Board of Directors

Board experience proves invaluable to leadership development.

By Rosetta Thurman | Apr. 3, 2009

I'll just go ahead and tell you that my view is that all young nonprofit professionals should serve on a board at some point. If you plan to stay in the nonprofit field, you should see the work from all angles, especially the governance arena. But more importantly, if you aspire to a CEO or other leadership position, board experience will prove to be invaluable to you. Here's why:

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- Board membership can bring credibility to your reputation and help you gain respect from older colleagues
- Serving on a board will allow you to hone skills you may not be able to learn at work in your current nonprofit role
- While there may be a gray ceiling in your organization, on boards, there are plenty of leadership positions available - you can lead one of the committees or serve as an officer
- Being a board member forces you to become knowledgeable about many different areas of nonprofit management: finance, human resources, fundraising, legal issues, ethics
- You can build a strong network through your connections with other board members - you will likely meet fellow board members who you may not have otherwise crossed paths with
- Serving on a board will help you gain the leadership skills you didn't learn in college or grad school - how to make that judgment call, when to speak up even when it's unpopular, how to build consensus

I joined my first nonprofit board in 2007 (<http://rosettathurman.com/blog/2007/11/life-as-a-new-board-member/>), and it's been the best leadership training I've ever had. Of course, many young nonprofit leaders already realize the benefits that board membership can provide for their career. For them, the next question they always ask is: How do I get on a board? Who would any nonprofit want such a young person as a board member? I don't have any wealthy friends or connections! How would I raise money for the organization? It's then that I think back on leadership guru Margaret Wheatley's definition of a leader:

“Leader: anyone who wants to help, who is willing to step forward to make a difference in the world.”

That’s you! If you have the desire and passion to serve as a board member, there are thousands of organizations that would be happy to have you. But before you take the plunge, make sure you do your due diligence. You don’t want to go **wasting your good talent** (<http://rosettathurman.com/blog/2009/03/are-you-wasting-your-golden-bowl/>) on a cause or organization that’s not a good fit for you.

### **Understand the Roles and Responsibilities of a Board Member**

The best place to learn about all the different responsibilities of being a nonprofit board member is on the **BoardSource website** (<http://www.boardsource.org/Knowledge.asp?ID=3.368>) . You want to make sure you can sign on to each one of them. The experience can be rewarding, but being on a board takes hard work and integrity just like a full-time job.

### **Don’t Be Afraid You Won’t Be Able to Raise Money**

Now I’m not Mama Moneybucks, but what I learned is that if you can’t make a significant donation as a board member, it’s really not that difficult to raise money from others to fulfill your commitment to the organization. Last year, I asked my friends to donate \$26 to one of the nonprofits I serve with in honor of my birthday. I raised over \$600, an amount that I wouldn’t be able to give personally, but was able to raise from my network.

### **Learn About the Experiences of Other Board Members**

I took this really fun, interactive online tutorial called **Nonprofit Board Basics** (<http://www.cpweb2.org/board/index.html>) from CompassPoint. It’s really informative and free training applicable to anyone thinking about joining a nonprofit board.

### **Find Board Openings on boardnetUSA**

A simple first step for young professionals looking to join a board would be to create an account and profile at boardnetUSA to find listed board opportunities in your area. It only takes about 20 minutes to fill in the requested information, especially if you take a little time beforehand to think about the kind of nonprofit you want to work with and the skills you want to utilize.

### **Don’t Hesitate to Contact the Organizaton Directly**

If there’s a cause or nonprofit you’re interested in already, don’t be afraid to call them directly and express your interest in board membership. In my experience, nonprofits are always looking for good board members! The best person to reach out to would be the CEO or Executive Director, who will be able to inform you of any openings and the process for throwing your name in the ring. You’ll never know until you ask, so put yourself out there!



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