

Do you want to serve on a nonprofit board?

Joining a **nonprofit organization** can be a great personal experience and a powerful way to support a mission you believe in. But choosing the right board is crucial.

If you're active in your social and professional communities and have shown an interest in philanthropy, you'll likely be asked to serve on the board of a nonprofit organization. It could be a group you've supported for a while, contributing money and volunteering your time, and this is a logical next step. Or you may be a friend of another board member or prominent in philanthropic circles.

"Being asked is incredibly flattering," says Nicole Sebastian, U.S. Director of the Optimus Foundation for UBS. "It's different from volunteering, or from just contributing financially; it's an opportunity to get involved at the highest level of an organization's strategy and oversight."

But joining a board that isn't a good fit for you, or joining for the wrong reason, is a decision you'll likely regret, Sebastian says. She recalls a New York executive who had long been a passionate supporter of a small nonprofit in her neighborhood. When she got the chance to serve as a member of the board, she took the plunge. "It has been a disaster," Sebastian says. "It's a very small group with significant organizational and operational flaws." And because the executive is the heavyweight on the board, the group relies on her for everything.

Simply being aligned with an organization's mission, as this woman was, is by no means the only consideration when deciding whether to join its board, Sebastian says. If this is to be a successful partnership, satisfying for you while also meeting the goals of the group, you need to do your own due diligence.

Find out what's expected

"The very first question has to be 'What is expected of me?'" says Mary Ann LoFrumento, M.D., a pediatrician and founder and president of the board at Hands Up for Haiti, a medical humanitarian organization.

Key takeaways:

- Being asked to serve on a nonprofit's board of directors is an honor, but do your homework before accepting the offer.
- Look into what is expected of you—the financial contribution required, your ability to raise funds and the need to tap into your professional skills.
- Don't rush into a decision. It's easier to say no up-front or take your time in deciding whether to accept the offer than it is to back out once you've joined.
- Your ability to help a nonprofit as a board member rests on whether the group's culture is a good fit for you.

Unlike directors of for-profit companies, who get paid for their service, nonprofit board members serve gratis and are typically called on to make financial contributions. "Everyone on the board should contribute, so make sure you're aligned about the amount," says Sebastian. "You may be invited to join the board of a terrific organization and the minimum annual contribution is \$100,000—whereas you were planning to give \$25,000. That needs to be discussed up-front." Whatever financial commitment you make, speak with your Financial Advisor to make sure that your donation fits comfortably with your other philanthropic activities, and with your overall financial strategy.

There may also be expectations about your skill as a fundraiser. If you have a prominent position in a corporation, for example, the group may assume that you have access to corporate funds or lots of wealthy people whom you won't mind asking for help.

In addition, the organization may have sought you out for your particular expertise, hoping to benefit from those skills. If you have a financial background, for example, you may expect to be asked to join the finance

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committee, Sebastian says. And while you may have hoped to do something removed from your day job, that may not be the first order of business.

Still another question to answer before you get involved with a nonprofit board is how much time is expected for you to commit—and that can vary from attending a few meetings each year to a much more hands-on role in the group’s operations, says LoFrumento, who has led and served on several nonprofit boards over the past 20 years. And while some groups have specified terms of service for board members, others may ask for a more open-ended commitment.

Take your time deciding

“People get invited to join a board, and they approach it like a job offer—they think they have to answer yes or no,” Sebastian says. “But you have a say in the process.” Don’t talk just with the CEO or the board chair, she suggests. Also meet with other board members, and assess the leadership of the group, its management and governance, and the financials. Often a nonprofit will operate in the red or very close to it, and while that may be a perfect fit if you enjoy helping organizations with significant challenges, others may want to join a more stable operation. “Make your decision when you have sufficient information,” Sebastian says.

Consider the culture

As a board member, you’ll be part of the fabric of the organization, and you need to understand its dynamics. It may be a venerable group that has been doing the same work for years—or it could be new, with an entrepreneurial feel. Its founder may be involved and make most of the decisions, leaving little room for your input. “You want to be comfortable and feel that you’ll have an impact,” Sebastian says. You may also need to check with your employer to make sure your service as a board member won’t pose any conflict.

“The kind of board I want to be a part of and that I want to lead,” says LoFrumento, “is one that appreciates every single person on the board; that appreciates their donation level, their input and their expertise; that keeps them informed about what the organization is doing and the impact of their dollars; and that thanks them for everything they do.”

If you know what you’re getting into and you make the right choice, being on a board can be incredibly rewarding, says Sebastian, who serves as a board member for several organizations. But she notes that it is much easier to say no from the start or take your time in deciding whether to proceed than it is to walk away after you’ve already joined, and that as busy as you undoubtedly are, you want to make sure there’s a good fit. “After all,” she says, “this is your free time that you’re talking about.”

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