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Finding Pro Bono Help through Board Recruitment

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We hear it all the time:

- We need an attorney on our board.
- We need an accountant on our board.
- We need a PR person.

Why do organizations feel they need these skills on the board? The answer is simple: Free Help!

Unfortunately, there are many reasons this is a BAD idea. Yes, a BAD idea.

It is a BAD idea for your board's governance, and for avoiding board pitfalls. There are better ways to get free help, and better ways to get good board members. First, the pitfalls. Then the good news!

Reasons NOT to Recruit Pro Bono Professionals for Your Board

1 Board members are there to govern - to lead and guide the organization towards the community's highest aspirations. Board members are not there to do the work that should be done by staff and/or volunteers.

And before you start to argue that giving of your time should negate your need to also give money; before you start to argue that getting others to give should count against what you give yourself - listen to reason:

However, most boards that set out to recruit an accountant (for example), do so to make up for a lack of adequate financial expertise on staff. They hope having an accountant on the board will straighten out their bookkeeping systems and keep an eye on the finances, all for free, for the whole 2 or 3 year term of their board appointment.

What really happens, though, is that the accountant stops thinking like a board member - leading and guiding, considering community impact of all decisions. Instead she is thinking like a staff person, watching day-to-day management issues and procedures, adding her expertise where she feels things are not up to her standards. She starts "doing" rather than "governing" **because that's what she has been asked to do.**

When we put an accountant on the board to help with the finances, we can't complain when they micromanage - we've asked them to do so! The same applies to any professional who is invited on the board to act as pro-bono staff.

The effect of the management-focus of a pro bono professional is not just the loss of one board member. One pro bono professional on the board can wreak havoc on the focus of the entire board, as other board members will defer to that professional under the assumption that "she's in the trenches, so she should know." We've seen whole boards unravel from the participation of a single pro bono professional.

2 The second reason applies specifically to attorneys who sit on boards as pro bono lawyers. By providing legal counsel to the board at the same time as being a member of that board, the attorney will have a direct conflict of interest - advising the board on legal issues that will ultimately protect him as an individual. For this reason it is a bad idea for an attorney to take on this role, as there is no way to do this cleanly.

3 The third reason to refrain from using board members as pro bono professionals has to do with logic and business sense. It is simply unlikely that you will find a professional whose practice centers around the issues specific to Community Benefit / NonProfit organizations.

What does a medical malpractice attorney know about the law related to tax exempt organizations? Will he be conversant in Intermediate Sanctions and private inurement issues - the things that land individuals in court and organizations in newspaper headlines? Will that accountant be well-versed in the tax laws of your state and country - laws that can affect how your organization raises funds? Does the PR person who represents the tire store and the beer distributor understand that Community Benefit organizations are more effective when they spend their time engaging the community in real two way relationships based on their issues, rather than excelling at branding or other standard business marketing tools?

When your organization needs help, you deserve to get folks who specialize in the specific circumstances of your organization. Your community is counting on that!

Use It Today

So How Do We Find Pro Bono Help?

It's simple: Ask for it. Finding a professional who will donate a few hours every once in a while is far easier than finding a professional who will agree to donate ten hours per month being a board member. If what you are looking for is professional services, ask for just that.

Further, when it comes to the services you absolutely need, pay for them if you must, but do NOT go without. An organization that does not have reliable legal counsel and accounting counsel is being penny wise and pound foolish. Just ask the organizations who have been late in filing their government paperwork if the fines have been worth doing without professional counsel.

Which All Leads Back to Board Recruitment

In a great twist of irony, the best place to seek board members is your volunteers. You have already tested their skills, their passion, their commitment - not to mention their ability to show up when they say they will be there!

Once an attorney or accountant or public relations guru has proven to be dedicated to your cause, then yes - by all means, invite her to sit on your board. But do not ask her to be there for her skills. Ask that person to govern - to lead and guide and make decisions on behalf of the community's highest aspirations. Attorneys and other professionals make terrific board members - as long as they are not there to provide free help.



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