

Mission Centered Board Leadership “Warnings for those being recruited as Board Members”

Mark R. Fisher

If you that are being recruited to serve on a board it is likely that you know the person who is talking to you regarding your potential interest about serving on the board. In any event, the process of recruitment will help determine if you are moving in the direction of your real interest.

Sometimes in an effort to recruit others, there is a soft sell approach. “You only have to attend an occasional meeting and give to the annual fund. It really should not take that much time. The key is to come on the board and find out what you would be interested in doing.” If this were the pitch my advice would be to stay away. In this case you are likely being asked to serve on a board that does not know where it is going and sooner or later there may be trouble. This statement is probably a little harsh but, if I am building an organization, I want and need people who are truly on board right from the beginning.

If you are still interested even with the above warning, it would make sense to first spend time on a committee or some other voluntary service that will give you greater insight into the organization and the people it serves. It is important to find clarity as to whether or not it is the right organization and mission for you. Through study, thought, and experience this will become clear over time.

Make no mistake about it- serving on a board is an act of leadership, sacrifice, risk and effort, helping fulfill a mission of service that should be clearly stated by the individuals representing the organization. The people who are asking may be friends, the cause they represent might be part of your giving portfolio, and you might even have the time available, but all of these together are still not enough to justify a positive response.

Board leadership represents a desire and commitment to serve the people who need the service and support offered by the organization in question. Considering the following questions may help to clarify your response to the request for involvement.

What is the cause?

If a member of the recruitment committee makes contact it is important to recognize that they are attempting to assess interest which would then move your status to that of a candidate at a later (or sooner) point in time. It is rare that a person would simply be recruited right on to the board without going through some sort of candidacy process. If there is no formal process you might want to ask why.

It is important that the organization asking you to come on board represent the needs of those people who are on your heart and mind. If the organization does not represent those people you might want to back off.

If, however, you are not sure what direction to go, it is best to take time and ask more about the organization and the people it serves. Find out why the person who is conducting the recruitment serves. Ask about the challenges the organization is facing. If there is not a match, do not decline up front. Spend a little more time reflecting on the request and the people this organization serves. Indicate the need to give it more thought and get back with a decision in a week or some other specific period of time. If there is still some uncertainty, call with more questions, take a tour and ask to talk with the people who receive care from the organization.

Does the cause match your passion?

If the organization is serving in the direction of your interest, the question becomes one of passion. How committed does the organization seem to be to the people served? Is there restlessness and urgency to do everything within organizational reason to meet the needs of the people through the fulfillment of the mission statement?

How seriously does the leadership take its role in serving those needs? Is this just some sort of “do-good” effort or is there a real desire to be of service? Is there a clear relationship between the organizational leadership and the people it serves? It is important that your passion match the organization’s passion.

From time to time I have seen new employees, come to work full of hope and expectation only to shut down within a few short weeks because of skeptics in their midst? There will always be “glass half empty” people around but if they are in power, I try to stay clear. I don’t want them to rob me of my passion.

I have seen dreams cut short by environments that go through the motions. When I sense this, I stay away. I have found that it is nearly impossible to change that type of environment by coming on board. If I sense a problem but am truly interested in the mission and the people it serves, I try to point out my observations and concerns and listen

for the response. If there is a desire to change, I might wait and see where the organization goes with the problem. If, however my observation is based on a lack of knowledge or understanding about a particular issue then it will be important to understand that reality. What becomes important is an open and honest exchange of ideas leading to a decision about my involvement.

Without passion matching passion those board meetings will begin to get very long and the individual will start to question “Why did I ever agree to this?”

What is the mission of the organization?

What is the organization’s purpose? Is it something that you see as critical to the people you feel called to help? Is there clarity of purpose? Can those who are sharing the mission articulate why it is important to them? How does the mission statement tie back to the people who are served and the community of support organized around them?

Clarity of cause and demonstrated commitment are important indicators for consideration in moving to a decision. I do not want to approach a significant need without a sense of vision and commitment.

How is the mission of the organization fulfilled?

If you are comfortable with the basic mission of the organization and feel moved to help the people it serves, the next consideration is asked in the question, “How will I help fulfill the mission?” The answer to this question might be found in the “vision statement” of the organization.

A vision statement is simply a series of key action steps or programs that the organization implements to achieve the mission. Looking at the vision statement, ask the question “How are things going?” It is important to hear about the strengths of the organization as well as its weaknesses and challenges for moving forward. Things are never as great as a point of sale brochure might indicate. With a clearer understanding about the real challenges that the organization faces it is then possible to grasp if this is where people are truly called to serve.

Beyond all of this, the vision statements should point to the future and where the organization is heading. Will there be new plans and programs coming into play or is this more of a stabilized situation that is trying to maintain the status quo? The mission and vision statements really establish the rhythm of the organization and how it moves forward and responds to its environment.

Finally, as you consider these questions it is important to understand how the organization tracks its progress and establishes accountability for the board and staff. By exploring fundamental questions centered on mission and vision people have a clearer picture about the organization they are considering joining.

What about peer pressure?

By now you have acquired a lot of information and may be thinking, “Is this really where I want to serve?” The suggestion here is that what is most important is your desire to serve people who are the focus of the organization’s mission. Without a sense of compassion concerning these people, a board member’s efforts are likely to be greatly diminished.

In short, it is important to identify and follow your passion as it relates to mission fulfillment. Do not let other motivations (status, peer pressure etc.) for serving cloud your understanding about mission.

Oh, about peer pressure? I have learned to forget about it unless of course the pressure is coming from the center of my call to serve the people who are the focus of the mission. Lacking passion I am not likely to achieve excellence. Without excellence my motivations for service will not be realized. In sharing this basic thought with a cross section of leaders within the world of charity, I have received overwhelming agreement.

People need to move away from pressure and into the world of helping each other find the center of their passion for service. It is always better to have a few deeply committed individuals than several who are simply lukewarm on mission.

What are you being asked to do?

If you are being asked to serve on a board, it is important to ask for a job description. In short, what are the expectations for each board member and why are you being asked to consider joining the board? Are there specific committees of the board? Which one are you likely to serve on? Do you agree with the organization’s assessment about the potential committee assignment or is there a need to talk this out?

If the organization was really hoping to place you on the finance committee but your desire is to serve on the

program committee, then this is something that needs to be discussed before the candidacy process is completed. If no particular thought has been given to potential committee assignments, you might want to ask why?

In closing, take the time to ask the right questions, challenge your motivations and settle clearly in an area of your passion. When you do, you will find that board membership is a rewarding experience that will add to your legacy of service.

About Mark R. Fisher

Mark is dedicated to helping a variety of organizations answer the question, “How do we build a community of compassion?”

The focus of his practice has come from a lifelong experience of working with volunteers, donors and staff. He began to realize that the similarities between each of the participants of an organization were more significant than the differences. “By building unity between volunteers, donors, staff and care receivers our ability to achieve full potential increases.”

His counsel has helped raised nearly \$750,000,000 in private support and generated thousands of stories in the media. Mark earned his doctorate from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan with a dissertation entitled, “Compassion in Board Decision Making.” He has been a guest speaker and presenter at numerous conferences and has served on a variety of non-profit boards. He is the author of *Mission Centered Board Leadership* which can be purchased on his web-site, www.markrfisher.com.

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