

Ten Stupid Things That Board Members Do To Mess Up Their Organizations

1. Members join boards of organizations they don't really care about. We fail to commit and fail to be passionate. The idea still exists that service on a board of directors is an "honorary" recognition, and it is not – it IS a lot of work and a serious challenge to lead through effective governance.

2. Members think that showing up for board meetings is the extent of their obligation, when membership entails more. The rule of thumb for a well-running organization is that a minimum six hours per month should be spent in board activity (credit Jeff Pryor at Anschutz Family Foundation):

- 2 hours at board meetings
- 2 hours in committee work
- 2 hours in outreach (marketing, public relations, fund raising).

In reaching this level of commitment, understanding when you're "wearing your board member hat" and when you're "wearing your volunteer hat." Additionally, members need to remember that efforts made by committees involve lots of hard work and should not be changed. Full boards often will want to change the decisions of committees without full knowledge of committee research and discussion. Let the committees do their jobs!

3. Board members don't prepare to do the job correctly. There is a general tendency to NOT prepare for board meetings (reading materials, etc.) and a lack of understanding the role of governance, which is to establish the proper controls to allow the organization's work to be done in a cost effective, responsible manner. Board members don't always see "the big picture," which is their role – to protect and promote the mission of the organization.

4. Board members don't understand budgets and other financial presentations, leaving it to others to make sure funds are in place and being wisely spent. These same members are shocked when the organization is "in the red" or, worse yet, the victim of an on-going misuse or theft of funds. Boards have a strong fiduciary responsibility within nonprofit organizations, and each member needs to have a clear understanding of how monies are being brought in, managed and spent.

5. Members think that "the bottom line" in an organization is its financial status. In any nonprofit organization, there are two bottom lines: the finances and the mission. All programs and initiatives should be weighed in financial terms, as well as by how they serve the mission.

6. Board members fail to speak up, when every indicator says that s/he should. Members fail to ask questions. Members fail to "rock the boat" as it sinks deep into the ocean. It is the responsibility of each member to ask questions and speak his or her mind, leading to knowledgeable and informed decisions.

7. Board members don't do their duty to give, get AND get off! This means giving personally – financially, expertise, time – getting others to contribute the same, and getting off the board when it's time. Yes, fund raising and term limits are minimal expectations of the job.

8. Board members hire, retain and put up with the wrong executive director. We expect too little of this person. We know we're micro-managing, and it's because the director isn't getting the job done. The board needs to set roles that are clearly defined, and regularly "check in" to make sure that the Board is doing board work, the staff doing staff work.

9. Board members fail to be involved in long-range planning, sometimes not looking to the future at all. Board meetings are spent talking about past progress and what already has happened. The board needs to take its responsibility of long-range planning very seriously, setting a course for the future, and then spend significant time looking ever-forward at board meetings.

10. Board members engage in "parking lot conversations." It is frustrating for both staff and other board members when conversations occur and "unofficial" decisions are made after or between meetings. Board members' opinions need to be heard at meetings, not in closed door or under-the-table discussions.

