

Finding a Seat at the Table

HOW TO JOIN A BOARD OF DIRECTORS

BY DWAIN HEBDA



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STEVE SWANSTROM,
PRESIDENT & CEO,
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For decades, being a corporate star meant having refined leadership skills, while companies invested significant amounts of money in consultants and personal coaches to cultivate these desirable traits. Today, many are finding the same benefit through serving on a local board, allowing them to grow personally and professionally while serving a good cause.

"Many professionals choose to work on boards that align with their personal and professional interests," said Steve Swanstrom, president and CEO of Centris Federal Credit Union and current chairman of the board for the Nebraska Humane Society.

"Speaking for myself, I enjoy the opportunity to support the community and meet people I may not have the opportunity to otherwise meet. It also gives me the opportunity to grow my leadership skills with a diverse group of leaders from different industries."

Board service is beneficial for employers as they benefit from committed leadership and insights, while the individual can stretch their skills in new and creative ways.

"Every successful organization requires good governance, strategic direction, and accountability," he said. "In general, board members provide the independence and support necessary to achieve these requirements. Serving on a board also gains experience that can be valuable to other organizations. It's also a great way to network with others in the community who may be aware of other board opportunities."

Raise your hand

Rebecca Armstrong Langle, senior director of community engagement for Nomi Health, said one of the bigger misconceptions people have is that it requires a highly specialized skill or credentials to be effective.

"People often think they need to be an accountant or that they have to be super well connected in the community, or that they need to be independently wealthy," she said. "But boards really need all sorts of people that represent who their communities are. That's the only way to have a truly well-functioning board — to have different perspectives and different backgrounds. And that's really what makes a board vibrant and healthy."

Langle, who manages the Nomi Health Foundation board and has sat on other boards, said one of the best ways for a first-time board aspirant is to begin as a volunteer.

"There are a limited number of board positions and you want to be selective

as to where you go because you want it to be something you're passionate about," she said. "I do think volunteering for an organization or being someone who receives services from an organization or just having some sort of connection beforehand is really great.

"The biggest thing about being on a board is the time commitment and your passion about the mission. If you're not enjoying what you're doing when you're there, it's not something that you're going to prioritize in your life. If you volunteer first, and it's not what you thought it was, it's very easy to take a step back. It's kind of like testing the waters to volunteer first."

Ready to work

This approach is all the more vital today, given the increased expectations many organizations have for board members.

"Serving on a board is more challenging now," said Anne Hindery, CEO of the Nonprofit Association of the Midlands. "What we're seeing in the nonprofit community are workforce shortages and so board members have to have tough conversations surrounding that. There's a fiduciary responsibility, you know, being a steward of money that doesn't belong to you.

"Boards have to be very strategic today. OK, we've survived the pandemic, now how do we reinvent ourselves? What are we looking at two, three, four years down the road? When I recruit board members, that's the kind of brain power I'm looking for."

Hindery said the pandemic hadn't affected the number of people interested in serving on boards and for good reason. Board service is a key networking tool and a feather in the cap of any aspiring professional.

While she discourages those merely seeking a seat to pad their resume, she did point to several professional advantages that come with board service.

"It allows someone to develop their natural leadership skills, their industry expertise, and their networking connections," she said. "Board service can improve your soft skills because you learn about teamwork and problem-solving. You can sharpen your analytical skills. It's a good way for people new to the community or young professionals to get a new perspective of their community as well.

"You know, we all get so stuck in our day jobs that it's hard to realize sometimes that there's a whole other set of things in the world going on. Being on a board of directors is just a great way to give back to the community."

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