



THE SPIGOT

from the NORTH DAKOTA RURAL WATER SYSTEMS ASSOCIATION



The Humble Board Member

By Bob Harris, CAE

Is there one quality that is most respected among board members? A quality that supports continuous success? Something that enhances a culture of trust?

Humility is the trait that best positions a director for sustainable effectiveness on a board.

“When you step into leadership, success is no longer measured by your ability to do the work, but by your ability to set the stage for others to do the work,” offers Heather Breen, director of governance, planning and engagement at the San Diego County Bar Association. She continues, “The most successful leaders welcome input and take a step back to allow others to shine.”

A trio of past board officers shared their experiences with a freshmen class of incoming directors. Here’s what they said about leadership and humility.

- Don’t be afraid to be self-deprecating. The person who might belittle him or herself, preferring to be undervalued or excessively modest, is likely to have the best experience. A director who hoodwinks the board or professes to know everything will have limited respect and success.

- Don’t take yourself too seriously.
- It is best if you approach leadership from the perspective of positioning the board or your committee for success. It should not be about personal or conflicted interests.
- Though you may have a title of “director” or “officer” on the board, it is not about the title – it’s about the members.
- You don’t have to be right or win every discussion. You have to produce results that advance the mission.
- Plan to be a mentor. Demonstrate an interest in the growth and success of every person on the team.
- Respect and work within the existing framework of mission, bylaws, budget, and strategic plan.
- Time will fly. Achieve as much as you can in the first three months, then the rest of year will be easier.

Their advice about humility reminds me of the book *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. It tells the story of a 10-year-old boy who was born with distorted facial features. It suggests that when it comes down to everything that is important, “If you have a choice between being right and being kind, choose kind.”

Note: Bob Harris, CAE, provides free governance tips and templates at www.nonprofitcenter.com.

WHY DIRECTORS VOLUNTEER

By Bob Harris, CAE

There are many reasons why volunteers accept leadership roles. The answers are both diverse and revealing.

I asked a group of leaders why they decided to become directors in their nonprofit organizations.

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. described volunteer service, “You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

When the opportunity arises, pose the same question. The answers are inspiring. The compilation is a testament of dedicated leaders.

- When I was asked to join the board, I felt compelled to accept. Every person has a responsibility for leadership.
- I want to contribute to the community that has positively influenced my life.
- Board service lets me be a part of shaping the future.
- This organization is a model of excellence, so I want to be involved.
- I am a proponent of mentoring and helping people succeed; this is my opportunity to fulfill my passion.
- I want to give back to my community.
- I want to learn about and contribute to the concepts of good governance.

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– Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

- It’s about an opportunity and experience to better my understanding of collaboration, engagement and leadership.
- Governing is an opportunity to position yourself to become a role model.
- The leadership skills I learn will benefit me for life.
- Through membership I have benefited and now is my time to give back.

The list reveals the diverse reasons to serve. Other reasons include personal development, enhancement to one’s resume, charitable concerns, sharing resources, and self-fulfillment.

IMPORTANCE OF “THE ASK”

In similar board discussions, I frequently ask, “How did you get on the board? Did someone ask you?”

Nearly everyone remembers who asked them. Most can name the person, no matter how long ago. The most likely invites come from other board members, past presidents, officers, and the executive director.

The passive approach to acquiring leaders has far less impact. Asking people to nominate themselves or sign up gets a low response compared to the direct ask by someone they respect.

Sen. John McCain may have described volunteer service best, “Nothing in life is more liberating than to fight for a cause larger than yourself, something that encompasses you, but is not defined by your existence alone.”



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