

## Becoming a Great Board Member

by Suzanne M. Kearney, Executive Director

**T**he days of serving on a nonprofit board because it looks good on a resume or indicates some level of prestige are over or should be. Our trustees and directors are invited to **serve**, not sit, on our boards.

A working board needs to become a living body in which there are shared values, understanding, tolerance and mutual respect. As trustees and directors we can face difficult times at board meetings, when new ideas are upsetting, when strong positions (sometimes opposing) are taken, when pressure mounts to make decisions. There is no time to deal with those who come to a meeting without real commitment or are unwilling to learn about and follow the dynamics of that board.

At times board work can become arduous, boring and unrewarding. Even these tasks play a significant role in helping a board ensure that the mission stays relevant. They are part of governing which is our primary role.

We want and need fully engaged, working boards. Trusteeship is not a spectator sport. If a working board is the goal, then the qualities of our trustees are enormously important. What qualities does a great board member have? Let us highlight a few.

A good board member stays **informed**. Ignorance and “off the top of the head” responses have led many a board down dead ends. At minimum, a board member does the homework, shows up and completes the tasks at the board meeting. A hard-working board absolutely depends on its members’ intimate and up-to-date knowledge of and passion for the nurturance of its ministry. Not knowing and not caring are unacceptable.

A valuable board member demonstrates **common sense and sound judgment** even in the most heated and turbulent circumstances. S/he can sense a way through opposing points of view and instinctively know when the need for immediate action is exaggerated.

A collaborative board member likes **working with other people**, actively respects the group process and enjoys helping a group come to a good conclusion. We want trustees who are passionate about our mission. What we don’t want

are people who regularly take on themselves the heady role of adversary, are determined to “win” at any cost, are trying to prove something or are unable to see the other’s point of view.

A centered board member **listens** to others and speaks, not out of a personal need to be heard or recognized but when s/he can make a genuine contribution to the discussion. This person can set the needs of the board and the ministry before her/his own, see the larger picture and support what is best for the whole organization.

A wise board member does not dominate by words but **leads by thought**. When a person consistently speaks only when useful to the group process, the group instinctively takes note when s/he raises hard questions or says things that others are fearful to say. This trustee avoids power plays but seeks to persuade, thereby building a bond among board members.

A life-giving board member is **open** to new ideas and excited by the possibilities of life. S/he demonstrates a keen interest in going forward even in the face of upheaval and uncertainty. The future offers choices – often difficult ones – and there is more than one path an organization can take. This person is gift not only to the board but also to the whole organization.

As we grow in these qualities we are becoming truly great board members.

Serving as a board member is a fine art and a true privilege. Being a board member means we hold the organization’s trust and the public’s trust in our hands. Let us hold them with awe and care.

### On the Way to Greatness

- Be a part of the solution
- Ask ourselves how can we help the group accomplish what it needs to do
- Follow through if we volunteer to do something
- Be present to our sponsored ministry