

Serving on a nonprofit board can be a rewarding experience, but it can also be time-intensive and demanding. If you are asked to serve on a board, Latinos LEAD recommends that you carefully explore and understand the organization's mission. This is the most important factor in your decision, and will be the foundation for sustaining your value to the organization and those whom it serves.

Q: How would I benefit by being a board member?

A. First of all--and most importantly--serving on a nonprofit board offers you an opportunity to improve your community and change lives in a meaningful way. Nonprofit board service can be a very fulfilling way to pay it forward to generations of Latinos in your community. For those in the private sector, a nonprofit board directorship enhances your resume and demonstrates that you are willing to take action to improve living conditions in the community where you do business. Employers and your colleagues will appreciate the benefits that can come through your board service, including leadership skill-building, business development opportunities, and the positive brand awareness your participation can bring. Your supervisor will likely want to know more about your involvement, especially as it pertains to the knowledge and skills that you acquired during your board service. Serving on a nonprofit board is a fantastic learning opportunity. Effective board members study the organization's work and conduct their own research to learn more about the type of issues and challenges addressed by the nonprofit. It's also a valuable opportunity for learning more about governance and management. Many nonprofits have multi-million dollar budgets, providing financial and strategic management opportunities that may far exceed the budget you manage at work. Nonprofit board membership also offers you new opportunities to expand your professional and personal network, which can be very beneficial in other areas of your life.

Q: How important is it that I understand and commit to the mission?

A: You must be committed to the mission of an organization before deciding to join its board of directors. Everything you do as a board member flows from a full understanding of the mission and how the organization works to achieve it. Your devotion to the mission affects how well you will perform, whether in fundraising, budget oversight, hiring the executive director, or other board responsibilities. If the organization serves Latinos, it is critical that you discover where you can bring insights to how the mission is translated into program development, communications, and outreach.

Q: As a board member, am I a volunteer?

A: Yes, but there's a catch. Nonprofit board members are not compensated, so yes, you are a volunteer. However, board members do not routinely volunteer in program operations or service delivery (start-up boards can be an exception to this rule). If you prefer a more hands-on volunteer opportunity, board service might not be the best way to get involved with an organization. When you volunteer at a program project or special event, you are

not in a supervisory role; it is the responsibility of the lead staff person to manage volunteers--including you!

Q: How much time will I be expected to devote to board work?

A: Board members are legally required to fulfill their fiduciary duties, which can require a considerable time commitment. The amount of time varies by organization, but simply planning to attend meetings is not sufficient. Board members must review financial statements, meeting materials, and prepare for and attend committee meetings on a regular basis. Effective board members are punctual and conscientious when preparing for board meetings. This shows respect for the time and work devoted by the staff and fellow board members. Board members may also be asked to attend special events and public gatherings, particularly annual fundraising events.

Q: Will I be expected to make a financial contribution?

A: One of the primary responsibilities of the board is to ensure that the organization has adequate financial resources to carry out its mission. Many organizations expect board members to make a personal contribution and/or solicit funds. Effective board members should be prepared to make connections and introductions to donors, attend fundraising events, and send personal and thank you notes.

Q: What kind of group dynamic will I encounter on the board?

A: Boards of directors must collaborate effectively to build consensus and govern an organization. Many boards have established a distinctive operating culture, although there are times when a particular culture is not optimal. While it is important for new board members to be observant and respectful of the existing group dynamic, you weren't recruited to be a clone of other board members. After you are comfortable in your role, bringing your unique professional style and perspective can be valuable to the organization. The highest performing boards comprise a mix of professionals to bring a variety of viewpoints to a discussion. Expect board members to represent a number of different industries, backgrounds, and perspectives.

Q: Can I really make a difference as a board member?

A: Well, that depends on you! Identify and take ownership of your role on the board. Do you bring financial expertise? Community connections? Before joining a board, discuss with the board chair and the executive director how your work on the board will make a positive impact on the organization.

Q: What if I'm not comfortable with the financial viability or other aspects of the organization?

A: Board members have a legal obligation to the organization they govern. If you are not confident the organization is being managed well, either by the chief executive or the current board members, you are obligated to make your concerns known to the appropriate committee chair and/or the board chair. Make sure you've done your homework, as bringing irrelevant or needless complaints to other board members may harm your credibility. Do not directly contact the executive director because the board supervises the executive only while seated in formal board meetings. If your concerns are not addressed to your satisfaction, you may need to reconsider whether you are prepared to continue as a board member.