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Avoiding Ten Stereotypes Nonprofits Have About Board Members From the Business World

As nonprofit leaders work to achieve meaningful social impact, business leaders have a significant contribution to make to the cause, bringing frameworks and discipline from their for-profit experiences to the effort.

However, cultural sensitivities and differences can get in the way of the most valuable potential. As rigor and analysis meet passion for a social mission and expertise on the issues being addressed, it is important to “translate” between these two perspectives to realize the true value of bringing them together.

Check out the descriptions of potential stereotypes for business people working in the nonprofit sector. Do any of these fit you? For each, see important concepts to keep in mind to remedy the description and make sure the door is open to contributing the most possible.

1. The “know-it-all”

The myth: Thinks knows more than others, talks a lot, discounts other perspectives

The reality: A real desire to contribute and add value

The remedy: Listen before talking, invite questions, solicit disagreement

2. “Square peg, round hole”

The myth: Has a certain analytical bent, views all situations through that lens

The reality: Feels most comfortable adding value in area of expertise

The remedy: Be explicit about any bias, actively consider ways of approaching questions

3. The “suit”

The myth: Doesn’t understand what it’s like for those in the field and is out of touch

The reality: May be true, despite best intentions

The remedy: Ask staff to assess their own performance and report it to you, visit sites

4. Speaks “Jargonese”

The myth: Talks much, says little, doesn’t get to the point, speaks to impress

The reality: Using terms from your world and speaking in what you know

The remedy: Restate your message in simple terms, make sure it’s still compelling

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5. “No heart”

The myth: Lacks passion for the social mission, is all analysis, discounts anecdotes

The reality: Cares about mission, looks to data as measure of results achieved

The remedy: Frame data analysis around anecdotes with focus on improving lives

6. The “schmoozer”

The myth: There for the “country club”, not the board service

The reality: Networking is exciting and valuable, but you care, too

The remedy: Demonstrate commitment to projects, roll up sleeves and get hands dirty

7. Hierarchical

The myth: Bosses staff around, raises tough issues and doesn't help solve

The reality: Wants data to make decisions, believes staff most qualified to implement

The remedy: Listen to staff concerns, ask how *you* are doing, serve as a resource

8. “By the book”

The myth: Mired in process, spins wheels in procedures of no value

The reality: Commitment to fulfilling your responsibilities thoroughly

The remedy: Link process to results, make sure you are doing real work, not empty process

9. “Show me the money!”

The myth: Concerned about financials alone, or at least first and foremost

The reality: Concerned for the organization's longevity, accountability for resource use

The remedy: Tie concern to outcomes, frame in opportunity to continue/improve social impact

10. The “micromanager”

The myth: Engaged in every detail, “breathing down your neck”

The reality: Wants to dig into operations and data to contribute the most possible

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The remedy: Explain why you want data, analyze *with* staff, be sure you are at the appropriate strategy level