

# Professionally Speaking



Judy Jean Chapman

## Serving On The Board Of Directors Of A Nonprofit Organization

*By volunteering their time and expertise as board members, nurses can better serve their communities and the nursing profession as well as advance their own careers.*

Nurses can make many unique contributions to their communities by serving as board members of nonprofit organizations. Through this kind of service, they will learn more about the health or social service needs of their communities and the problems and limitations involved in addressing these needs. As board members, they will have direct influence in shaping the policy decisions that affect health care in their particular specialties.

In addition, by participating on boards, nurses will meet and work with other professionals with whom they might not otherwise come into contact. These professional friendships not only will be rewarding in and of themselves but also may be very helpful to nurses in the achievement of personal goals in their nursing careers.

Further, serving on a board of directors will broaden the nurse's base of knowledge and sharpen problem-solving skills. Board members deliberate complex, multifaceted, and multidisciplinary issues that involve not only health care considerations but also legal, legislative, financial, personnel, public relations, and fund-raising matters.

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### *Behind the Oak Door*

Many of the skills and abilities needed for productive board membership are the same as those needed for successful nursing practice. These include the ability to collect and assess data; plan and set priorities; and conceptualize, evaluate, and modify ideas. Board members need well-developed verbal and written communication skills. They must accept accountability for their actions and be able to participate in groups as well as provide leadership.

Board members are selected from the community or region and serve in a voluntary capacity for a specified period of time. Although they have a common interest in the programmatic areas of the organization, they are selected because of their diverse characteristics and expertise. This diversity promotes comprehensive deliberation of problems or policy issues.

The organization's written bylaws, which are legally advantageous, state the characteristics and responsibilities of the board. Traditionally, boards have responsibility and accountability for establishing the policies that will determine the programs of the organization; hiring, evaluating, and, if necessary, terminating the contract of the executive director of the organization; and ensuring the fiscal responsibility and solvency of the organization.

The frequency of board meetings is determined by the bylaws and by the work to be done. Meetings often are held once a month, although they may be held as infrequently as two, three, or four times a year. Prior to each board meeting, the president of the board, in collaboration with the organization's executive director, prepares an agenda. The agenda along with identification of the items to be voted on and background information are then mailed to each member.

Between scheduled meetings, problems are handled, as they arise, by the mechanism stipulated in the bylaws. Frequently, this mechanism takes the form of an executive committee composed of the officers and selected members of the board.

Both the board and the organization have formal and informal lines of communication. The appropriate line of communication for board members is through the board to the board president to the executive director. Problems may be intensified if the organization's staff members contact board members directly about problems, or vice versa.

Much of the background work for addressing issues is carried out at the committee level, with recommendations for action coming before the full board. Consequently, board members usually are expected to participate on one or more committees.

The nominating and board devel-

opment committee is one of the most important committees. It identifies the particular areas of expertise needed by the organization and seeks individuals with these capabilities. Another important committee is the finance committee, which has the responsibility for financial planning and budgeting.

### **Taking the First Step**

To become a board member, a good approach is to volunteer to serve on a board committee. Most boards allow and encourage this kind of participation by interested members of the community. In this way, the board can draw upon the talents and abilities of a large number of people, increase community awareness of the services and needs of the organization, and identify the strengths of individuals who may be nominated for board membership in the future.

If this option is not available or desirable, another approach is simply to inform current board members about being interested in serving and the reasons why. Emphasize any qualifications or personal strengths that may be of particular value to the board.

Most nurses probably will feel proud and flattered when asked if they are willing to be nominated for board membership. However, a word of caution is in order. Never give a yes or no answer without examining the expectations and responsibilities involved and considering how the position will relate to personal goals.

To make an informed decision, ask about the functions and purposes of the board. In addition, ask about the composition of the board and the kind of expertise the nominating and board development committee is seeking.

Then consider how much time board members will be expected to spend for both board and committee meetings, the term of the appointment, and the staff-support services available. Assess the board's liability insurance coverage, and ask about any financial commitments

that board members may be expected to make.

### **Learning the Ropes**

Once appointed or elected to a board, new members need to learn as much as they can about the board as quickly as possible. An orientation session for new board members usually is conducted by the leadership of both the board and the organization. At this session, new members are given specific information about the organization and the board. Role expectations of the organization's staff, executive director, and board members will be discussed, and overlapping areas of responsibility will be pointed out. In addition, copies of pertinent documents will be distributed.

If this kind of orientation session is not offered, the new board member should request one. A nurse going to work in a new health care setting would seek information pertinent to the job. The same must be done for productive board involvement.

To be effective in board deliberations, the new board member needs to become familiar with the other members. At meetings, name cards placed on the table in front of each person will help the new member learn and remember names and faces. If they are not provided, request them. Another helpful aid is a typed list of the names, addresses, positions, phone numbers, and terms of service of board members.

### **When Asked to Lead**

If asked to serve as chairperson of a committee, remember that a component of leadership is the ability to identify and use the expertise of others. To accomplish tasks in an effective and efficient manner, the chairperson must be aware of the roles played by individual members of the committee and be able to recognize any "hidden agendas."

The chairperson also must have a working knowledge of parliamentary procedure (such as *Robert's Rules of Order*). Meetings should be kept

as brief as possible and should start on time. These two factors will affect attendance and participation.

Further, the chairperson must keep committee members apprised of upcoming activities and avoid the tendency to inform and manage by crisis orientation. Deliberations will be more effective if the board's formal and informal lines of communication are used to the fullest extent on an ongoing basis.

### **An Opportunity and a Challenge**

Much has been written about boards of directors, board leadership, and board functions. If asked to serve on a board, the nurse may find it helpful to review some of this literature (see bibliography).

In addition, public speaking and debating skills may need to be improved. Various courses and workshops are offered on these subjects. Contacting a media consultant or joining an organization such as Toastmasters may be beneficial. Women may find that network organizations for women executives are another valuable resource.

By serving as board members of nonprofit organizations, nurses will gain valuable experience and professional friendships that will contribute to their functioning as nurses. At the same time, they will advance public recognition of the nursing profession.

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