

Understanding board member needs is the key to having a high-functioning volunteer leadership team.

Learn how to get the most out of these vital, though often perplexing, relationships.

# Why Don't Board Members Do What They're Supposed to Do?

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## Introduction

As a consultant, author, and speaker whose work focuses on helping improve the performance of nonprofits and associations and their essential leadership teams, I know board member performance is a constant topic of discussion.

An experience while conducting a workshop for about 100 nonprofit organization leaders led me to realize the *real* level of frustration associated with volunteer board members not meeting expectations.

During the workshop, the response to my question, “*What’s your number one problem?*” momentarily stunned the audience, and me as well.

The group’s answer came back very strongly, very loudly and in unison: ***“It’s those board members! Why don’t board members do what they’re supposed to do?”***

The forcefulness of such a collective reaction was followed by an energetic buzz around the room.

As a follow-up, I asked two more questions: “Are those board members aware of what it is they’re supposed to be doing? And if they are, did you ask them or did you tell them?” The room went instantly quiet. Why? Because the very same people who were saying, “We have nonperforming board members,” all of a sudden recognized they might be contributing to the problem.

The intriguing response that day started me on a two-year project to find out answers to the compelling question: ***Why don’t board members do what they’re supposed to do?*** By conducting a survey of nonprofit and association board members, I gained a revealing understanding of board member thinking relative to criticism of their performance.

## Survey Methodology

The survey’s objective was to identify issues affecting relationships between nonprofit organizations and their board members – from the board members’ perspectives.

### *Survey Question 1:*

*What advice would you offer to organizations who ask the question, “Why don’t board members do what they are supposed to do?” (Listed in order of frequency mentioned)*

1. Board members don’t have direction and need training.
2. Board members aren’t held accountable.
3. They’ve been allowed/asked to sign on for the wrong reasons.
4. They aren’t the right people for the job.
5. They aren’t screened properly.
6. They are recruited with a “soft sell” that may not be realistic.
7. They don’t buy into the job.
8. They aren’t given specific tasks.
9. They aren’t communicated with effectively.
10. They’re being asked to do too much.

Survey responses came from what would be considered a “blue-chip” list of board members from across the country. Respondents included business and community leaders who serve as board members of nonprofit and community organizations.

Survey participants reflected a wide variety of occupations and interests, including university presidents, top corporate executives, business owners, association CEOs, retirees, teachers, community activists, political leaders, doctors, attorneys, engineers, management and non-management level employees, a college basketball official, and dedicated volunteers.

In addition to getting responses to the priority question – *Why don't board members do what they're supposed to do?* – the survey collected suggestions regarding how organizations can be more effective in engaging their existing and future board members through four additional open-ended questions:

- ***As a board member, what is your biggest criticism related to organizations and relations with their boards?***
- ***When asked to serve on a nonprofit board, what motivates you to say yes?***
- ***What are reasons you would turn down a board position?***
- ***How can organizations be more effective in utilizing their board members?***

I found it significant that although the questions asked were open-ended, survey participants shared responses that were very similar.

Despite geographic, demographic, and personal characteristic diversity, in essence their collective response indicates a strong common dominator exists for the board service experience that board members are having.

***Survey Question 2:***

***As a board member, what is your biggest criticism related to organizations and relations with their boards? (Listed in order of frequency mentioned)***

1. There are communication problems.
2. There are nonperforming board members.
3. More direction and clear expectations are needed.
4. The organization isn't being run efficiently or effectively and is wasting time.
5. As a board, we are not being listened to by the organization.
6. Meetings are poorly organized (no purpose, too long, too frequent)
7. Individual skills and interests of board members aren't being utilized effectively.
8. Staff performance and staff relationships with other board members are negatively affecting their work.
9. Where's the money? We want to know more about the budget.
10. Board members are being given too much work.

This white paper shares that response along with board member suggestions for correcting less-than-positive situations.

### The Board Members' Perspectives

Survey results revealed candid opinions regarding board member relationships with the organizations they have served.

In fact, their responses show they are just as passionate about those relationships as the organizations are about underperforming board members!

Of course, many organizations enjoy highly effective and very engaged boards. But, for those who don't and for those who want to make sure their board member relationships remain strong, paying attention to what these board members have to say – as well as listening to your own board members – will pay big dividends.

Six recurring themes were identified as the foundation for most performance-related issues and solutions: communication, no surprises, connectivity, time, accountability, and organizational focus.

Survey respondents whose performance was being criticized consider their volunteer involvement to be very personal and important to them. They also feel frustration when the organizations they serve aren't doing what *they're* supposed to do. They voiced concern that they aren't seeing things being done the way they're supposed to be done, organizationally.

### The board members' criticisms were very clear:

**Organizational communication methods aren't working.** Board members not only don't feel like they're being informed, they don't think they're getting adequate information, or the timeliness of the information isn't coming the way they think it ought to come. Surveyed board members say they are often the last to know about critical information or not being told before an issue hits the news media.

If you are communicating with board members, it's possible your method of communication is not effective. Do they have time to read the materials you send them and make an educated decision? Take time to learn how they communicate. People receive and process information

#### Survey Question 3:

*When asked to serve on a nonprofit board, what motivates you to say yes? (Listed in order of frequency mentioned)*

1. Must relate to cause, have interest and a meaningful connection.
2. Must have an ability to make an impact, not only be a name on letterhead.
3. It matters what is being heard about the organization from other board members.
4. What's the time expectation?
5. The organization's history and reputation is important. How are they perceived?
6. Is it a quality staff?
7. Who's asking?
8. The organization must relate to personal/professional/business objectives.
9. The organization's financial status influences decisions to say yes.
10. Do personal skill sets match what the organization needs?

in different ways. Do you know your board members well enough to understand what communications approach works best for each individual?

**They don't like surprises.** Board members were very clear that they often feel like a bait-and-switch move has been pulled when performance expectations weren't clearly communicated prior to their commitment to board service. Specifically, if board members are going to be asked to raise or give money, they need to know that up front, and there also needs to be a firm commitment to whatever is expected. Don't assume that everyone knows what expectations

may exist. ***Survey responses indicated that this is a major issue!***

***Survey Question 4:***

***What would be some reasons you have turned down a board position? (Listed in order of frequency mentioned)***

1. The board isn't organized and its goals aren't clear
2. Not personally interested; No personal connection to the organization or their goals aren't a personal priority.
3. No time to give to a particular organization.
4. Unable to meet the board responsibilities.
5. Not wanting to work with current members of the board.
6. There's a personal cost or there's too much fundraising.
7. Not wanting to work with the staff.
8. The current leadership is a turn-off.
9. It's a board in name only and not much would be accomplished.
10. There was a conflict of interest.

**Organizations are wasting board members' time.** Consider the schedules and time constraints of your board members. Especially today, time is a precious commodity; people don't want their time wasted. They're willing to give it to you, but they want it used wisely. Are your meetings productive? Do they start and end on time? Think about whether you're making the most of your board's time investment.

**Connectivity is a must.** Volunteer management 101 says the degree of connection someone feels greatly influences the length of time they will continue to stay involved. The keys to creating connectivity are communicating effectively, building relationships,

showing appreciation, and creating an environment where something worthwhile is being accomplished. Survey comments confirm many organizations have a great deal of work to do in this critical area.

**Board members want performance accountability.** They want a standard that's required of *all their fellow board members*. Performance accountability should be embedded into a board's culture, and board members should be accountable. Organizations failing to deal with this issue are missing needed performance and at the same time are at risk for losing board members who are productive.

**The right board members aren't being recruited in the first place.** Like any college football team that's successful year after year despite losing its top performers, you must keep

recruiting great players and make sure you have the right players in the right positions on your board if you're going to be a championship team.

Improve your recruiting success by pre-qualifying your prospects. Work from a profile of skills and experience that your board needs. Adding someone just to fill a slot is asking for more performance-related frustration. Also, pressuring someone to say yes who already has time constraints is usually going to be a mistake.

Recognize that a good board prospect just might be too busy to participate, and a "no" could actually be the best response to your invitation.

**Hone your organizational focus.** Surveyed board members suggest they're very turned off by lack of organizational focus; make sure you have effective planning mechanisms in place. Strategic plans and mission statements are an ideal starting point for creating structure. Provide progress reports on key priorities.

Their comments regarding focus also applied to staff performance when a professional image is not projected. Lack of attention to detail, poor follow through, and even appearance were often mentioned as influencing perception about organization.

### Factors That Lead Board Members in Choosing Their Commitments

**According to my survey, having a "good cause" is not good enough to recruit effective board members, but here's what is:**

**They must be able to relate to the cause.** Prospective board members, who can identify more closely with your cause, are going to be most likely to say yes. How can you find that out? Ask.

**The reputation** of the organization, its board, and existing board members affects prospects' decisions of saying "yes" or "no."

**Current leadership of the board**, opinion of the professional staff, and the perception of the organization's structure, factor in to board members' choosing where they offer their services.

#### *Survey Question 5:*

*How can an organization be more effective in utilizing their board members? (Listed in order of frequency mentioned)*

1. Clearly define what is being requested.
2. Listen to the board's opinions.
3. Have good, effective communications with your board.
4. Get buy-in and create ownership.
5. Limit tasks the board members are asked to do.
6. Know your board members and play to their strengths.
7. Recognize board members' accomplishments.
8. Don't take board members for granted.
9. Make sure your board members know each other.
10. Have fun!

## How to Turn the Tide

**Once you're ready to transform your frustration with board members into mutually beneficial relationships, *here's how to start*:**

**Commit to a thorough orientation and training of your board members.** Are you conducting annual performance evaluations and then communicating the results? A recent *BoardSource* survey found that only 55 percent of boards across the country do formal, written board performance evaluations. *BoardSource* also reports nonprofit CEOs grade board member knowledge of roles and responsibilities at a "C+." Effective orientation and training takes more than handing out a board notebook. If your board isn't making the "A" honor roll, improvement is needed. Is it fair to criticize performance when someone hasn't been given an opportunity to understand what's expected?

**Understand some board members don't automatically accept the role of fundraising.** If your organization must have fundraisers, you need people who can sell. But, not every person who is passionate about a cause is a good fundraiser. Don't assume everyone understands or is committed to your fundraising expectations.

For fundraising, you need to fill a lot of different roles. Fill them strategically.

**Improve communication with your board.** You now know you need to know your board members, communicate with them, find out what they really and truly think, and how they can feel more involved and more engaged. Understanding who your board members are is the key to answering the different criticisms that are affecting board performance.

Yes, they're in the board meetings, they get the reports, and they see the financials. But don't assume board members understand their performance expectations. The more knowledge you can share and the more training opportunities you can offer current board members, the more involved and knowledgeable they will feel. They soon will begin to feel like someone is communicating with them.

**One final lesson:** Understanding board member relationships is the absolute key to having a high-functioning board. Why do we join volunteer organizations? **The number one reason** is because we know someone else who is involved or have a personal connection with the cause that is being addressed. After saying yes, why do we stay? There's a personal connection that has been established, and it comes from relationships.

Without fail, when I ask an audience what the number one key to a successful relationship is, the answer is *communication*. The key to good communication is listening. So as the survey results suggest, take time to listen to your board members.

## Conclusion

The frustration expressed during my workshop that triggered this project and similar feelings communicated through my board member survey are contributing to everyday conflict in the world of “doing good” because of the board member relationship mistakes being made.

Take advantage of the feedback and the suggestions from the **“Why don't board members do what they're supposed to do?”** survey, and your board members will be much more likely to do what you want them to do. If you listen and build solid relationships with your board, the successes with your board member performance will be greatly enhanced.



### About the Author: Hardy Smith



*Hardy Smith's drive for facing challenges head-on, and transforming them with effective, creative solutions, was shaped through his years of work with one of America's most successful and popular sports, NASCAR. There, in several management and leadership roles, Hardy represented the NASCAR family of businesses through a variety of leadership activities. With these experiences, Hardy has translated the business models of some of America's most prominent corporate management teams into forward-thinking, practical and timely applications any volunteer- and member-based organization can and should adopt.*

*Hardy's dedication to serving associations, nonprofits and other volunteer-based organizations is reflected in his professional affiliations as well. He has held numerous local, state and national volunteer leadership positions, while his professional relationships have included ASAE – The Center for Association Leadership, the premier source of learning, knowledge and future-oriented research for the association and nonprofit profession; FSAE – Florida Society of Association Executives; National Speakers Association, the leading professional organization for speakers; and BoardSource, which is dedicated to advancing the public good by building exceptional nonprofit boards and inspiring board service.*

*Hardy's work on creating effective board member relationships has been featured in leading publications, such as BoardSource, GuideStar, Nonprofit Business Advisor, Canadian Fundraising & Philanthropy, and Nonprofit World.*

*Today, Hardy Smith is living his calling by channeling his experiences and insight into maximizing the success of nonprofits, associations and other volunteer-based organizations around the country; work that has earned him recognition from Florida's network of Small Business Development Centers <http://www.sba.gov/content/small-business-development-centers-sbdcs>. The group recently named Hardy Smith Consulting as one of its Small Business Success Stories.*

**Book Hardy Smith today to speak to your nonprofit and association leadership teams!**  
Call (386) 451-0652 or email Hardy at [hardy@hardysmith.com](mailto:hardy@hardysmith.com).

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