

## **Increasing Civic Reach**

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## Increasing Civic Reach

Nonprofits must have influential board members who connect them to the communities they serve **BY PAUL VANDEVENTER**

I AM CONVINCED THAT skill at fundraising and governance alone do not an excellent board member make. Nor do such skills alone ensure that a nonprofit organization maintains a durable, deep connection to the wider community it serves.

A third skill—I call it civic reach—distinguishes a great board member from a merely adequate one, a world-class nonprofit from one that is simply functioning. Take a couple of examples: Back in 2005, Rochester Area Community Foundation's (RACF) smart, highly engaged board had few well-known civic leaders. With the guidance of Jennifer Leonard, the foundation's president and executive director, RACF aimed to become greater Rochester, N.Y.'s "catalyst for community change" and realized that movers and shakers could extend the institution's influence. RACF added to its board the CEO of the city's chamber of commerce, the CEO of a leading advertising company, the area's school board president, a noted venture capitalist, a former United Way campaign chair, and the head of Rochester's downtown development group. In just one of the positive outcomes, the chamber incorporated RACF's recommendations into its annual state advocacy platform, resulting in \$7.8 million in restored child care subsidies, plus crucial support for after-school funding.

In another example, the board of directors of Make-A-Wish Foundation International, a nonprofit devoted to granting the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions, shifted its composition to achieve a worldwide leadership profile. Previously, the organization was governed by chapter affiliate representatives from various countries, a decidedly internal focus. The new board boasts a powerful cadre of business leaders with the prestige, power, and contacts to open doors worldwide. Two board members illustrate this new heft. Jim Fielding, president of Disney Stores Worldwide, connects Make-A-Wish to Europe, Asia, and North America, prime markets for both Disney merchandising and Make-A-Wish civic engagement. Tim Kilpin, general manager and senior vice president for Mattel Brands, provides Make-A-Wish with cash contributions from the company's toy sales and facilitates business relationships through its worldwide network. Savvy, connected players like Fielding and Kilpin—people with profound civic reach—serve as global thinkers for charities while they tend to their own business interests. As a result of its new board,

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Make-A-Wish more expertly navigates its corporate and individual relationships, ties its work to corporate social responsibility efforts, attracts a wider range of corporate sponsorship dollars, and manages its wish granting on a worldwide scale.

### POWER TO THE WEAKEST SECTOR

Board members with civic reach compensate for the inherent limitations of the social sector, arguably democracy's most critical, yet weakest, arena in terms of money and power. Social ventures generally lack the commercial sector's profit-driven muscle and the public sector's power to mandate by law and levy taxes to raise resources. Nonprofits need deep civic roots to thrive. To scale up operations, they need strong relationships with leaders in business, government agencies, and elective office. The sum of every board member's civic reach is the soil in which those roots grow. Boards anemic in civic reach oversee organizations that are weak in civic relevance and resilience. Such organizations might have a range of

funding sources and may run well operationally. But they rarely find themselves plugged into the civic power grid, where decisions about community and individual needs are largely made. Even with success, organizations deficient in civic reach often stand as capable orphans, unaccountably disconnected and alone, wondering why the recognition they think they deserve lies beyond their grasp.

In my work as a nonprofit organization executive, I've learned that civic reach is a function of three factors in a prospective board member: the person's personal and professional prestige, his local knowledge, and what he can deliver in terms of communitywide or worldwide strategic relationships. These three assets—prestige, knowledge, and connections—matter as much to the organization as attentive governance, outright donations of money, and the ability to solicit gifts. Taken together and used wisely, board member prestige, knowledge, and relationships can produce monetary and marketing returns while elevating ordinary fundraising and routine governance into transformative stewardship. Nonprofits cannot afford to leave to chance that board members will acquire these abilities.

This street also runs both ways. The smartest board members want to serve on nonprofit boards that know how to trade on civic reach. These people know that investing their prestige, knowledge, and connections on behalf of an organization can have the virtuous effect of increasing and enhancing their reach in other civic settings and on other boards.

#### OTHER NECESSARY QUALITIES

People with civic reach also distinguish themselves through at least four other qualities. They tend to have what I call shrewd environmental sensing. They possess upstream knowledge about unfolding events and can position nonprofit programs and services at the confluence of opportunities to make positive change and secure resources. Board members with civic reach can sensitize the organization's antennae to read political, economic, and societal signals and translate them into planning and initiatives that succeed and grow. For example, former cable television business executive Perry Parks grew up in south Los Angeles, served as a social worker after college, and for most of his business career lobbied every department or political body in the city that touched on telecommunications interests. On the board of Community Partners, the organization I run, Perry became the go-to guy for decoding the interests of elected officials or for developing strategies to reach civic leaders in ways that would cause them to listen and respond.

Another quality that distinguishes board members is an ability to advance and defend a nonprofit's organizational mission. When board members of impeccable credibility stand up on behalf of an organization, decision makers heed what they have to say. For example, Robert Hertzberg, a successful business entrepreneur and former speaker of the California State Assembly, co-chaired the board of the nonpartisan policy organization California Forward. Respected as a pragmatic moderate in the assembly, Hertzberg lent his finely honed legislative instincts to practically every recommended element on the organization's reform agenda. When California Forward took the agenda to the state's governor and other elected leaders, everyone knew that Hertzberg's political intelligence and political weight lay behind the ideas up for adoption. The jury's still out on the agenda of

California Forward, but according to Hertzberg, California voters and the state's new governor, Jerry Brown, will have ample chance in the months ahead to grapple with its recommendations, both legislatively and through initiatives on statewide ballots.

Board members also should be able to reach the broader public. The visibility, credibility, and genuine commitment of board members with civic reach can confer indisputable local authenticity on nonprofits, even when the nonprofit is a private grantmaking foundation. Time saved in establishing public credibility translates directly to money saved for other organizational priorities. For example, Tessie Guillermo, former president and executive director of the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum and president and CEO of the nonprofit ZeroDivide, straddles many civic, cultural, and community boundaries. From her perch as chair of the California Endowment's board of directors, Guillermo can confer legitimacy for the grantmaker's sometimes controversial giving agenda inside and beyond the state's swelling Asian-Pacific Islander community. As a recognized change maker and leader with strong roots and relationships in the state's Asian-Pacific Islander community, Guillermo's presence on the California Endowment's board speaks volumes about the foundation's commitment to a fair shake in its grantmaking for groups serving Asian-Pacific Islanders.

Finally, board members should have inside access to power. That way, they can help place representatives of groups they serve at tables where pivotal deals and allocation decisions get made. This notion became clear to me when I met Norm Clement in 1997. Some called Clement, now deceased, a political fixer. He worked for Richard Ferry, co-founder of executive search giant Korn/Ferry International. He knew the business community and had a reputation for getting things done. President Bill Clinton had just passed welfare reform legislation, and cities and counties everywhere were feverishly fashioning programs to help low-income people meet the new law's work requirements tied to receiving welfare. Clement offered himself less as a board member and more as a civic scout to our loose-knit coalition of nonprofits and business groups in Los Angeles. We'd tell Clement what we were looking for—office space, seed funding, meetings with important people—and, more often than not, Clement could deliver or direct us to someone who could.

All of this shows that the moral aura of nonprofit charitable endeavors must be accompanied by the actuality of real influence. Time and time again, I have heard funders and other donors insist that they want to invest dollars for maximum leverage. Nonprofits interested in answering this call need to prove they have adequate capital substitutes to backstop their work. Nonprofit boards with extensive civic reach provide that bulwark. Experience has shown me that funders and donors place their grant bets on confident civic achievers accustomed to getting community work done quickly and without fuss.

Alongside fundraising and governance, then, civic reach represents nothing less than the essential third leg of a nonprofit board's sustainability platform. Organizational sustainability depends on intimate local knowledge that can inform program direction and on relationships that can connect programs to resources and communities. No matter how good an organization becomes at fundraising and governance, without civic reach it risks failure. ■