



## THE FIVE “WS” OF NON-PROFIT BOARDS FOR YOUNG LAWYERS

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Young lawyers. Over-worked, underpaid, and under a multitude of personal and professional pressures. With so much to deal with, why would one ever agree to serve on a non-profit board? This article explains why, and four other “Ws” of serving on non-profit boards of directors. The goal of this article is to help

young lawyers understand what it means to be a non-profit board member, and perhaps encourage attorneys to serve.

### What is non-profit board service?

While there are many different types of board models and potential applicable rules, usually the duties of directors require that they oversee the organization’s execution of its mission on behalf of donors, beneficiaries, other stakeholders, and the community. The board bylaws usually define the roles and responsibilities of directors.

A director’s oversight function includes a duty of care and a duty of loyalty. A director’s duty of care refers to the responsibility to exercise appropriate diligence in overseeing the management of the organization, making decisions, and taking other actions. In meeting the duty of care, directors are expected to attend and participate in board and ad hoc committee meetings; and also remain informed about the organization’s business, especially its financial circumstances and transactions.

A director’s duty of loyalty refers to the responsibility to act in good faith and in the organization’s best interests, not the interests of the director, a family member, or an organization with which the director is affiliated. Directors cannot use their positions for personal gain and must avoid conflicts of interest or the appearance of any such conflicts.

### Where should I serve?

There is a non-profit organization to suit every interest and cause. Many are in urgent need for a lawyer to serve

on their board. Locally, programs such as Leadership SWFL through SWFL, Inc. or Leadership Collier through the Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce can assist in identifying community needs and connecting similarly-minded leaders. One good place for a young lawyer to start is to reflect on their personal connections to a particular cause, and whether they or their family have been assisted or could have benefitted from the assistance of a particular non-profit organization. Also, young lawyers looking to serve can consider personal hobbies and activities and look for organizations that support those activities. Lawyers also often find it reward to get involved in organizations where clients or colleagues are involved or in which they serve. Most importantly, young lawyers should find their personal niche, which presents the challenges they seek, which they are most comfortable with, and which provides them with the personal satisfaction of having made a difference in the world.

### Who should serve?

All lawyers are qualified to serve, but before committing one should confirm availability to attend at least one board meeting or committee meeting per month and meet all of the organization’s requirements for the role.

Once the young lawyer can confirm their ability to fulfill board requirements, lawyers considering service may benefit from self-reflection, considering how they can develop their leadership skills by cooperating with others to solve organizational problems and challenges. There are many books and courses on leadership available to those who need or want them, and some favorites include *True North* by Bill George and *Start With Why* by Simon Sinek. These resources can help persons determine whether they would enjoy participating in developing the collective judgment of the group along with fellow directors from different backgrounds and skillsets, and learn new skills and new ways to think about and solve problems. These self-reflection tools can add value to the young lawyer’s personal and professional life.

### When should I serve?

Opportunities are constantly available to serve non-profits. Though some organizations are more selective than others, there is a huge need for attorneys on every board. A call to a non-profit organization's executive director usually results in an enthusiastic email from the organization forwarding a copy of the application to serve as director. The timeframe for beginning service is immediately after deciding that one is ready to serve.

While that first experience serving on a board can seem daunting, consider viewing it as an amazing opportunity to develop the ability to be effective leaders and managers. Most lawyers receive no training for such tasks. For those of us who have such training, there is no substitute for experiential learning side-by-side with fellow directors who are likely leaders in their professions. Non-profit directors are usually exposed to business skills not usually taught in law school, such as: reviewing and analyzing audit letters, financial reports, and balance sheets; participating in strategic planning; developing committee action plans and reports; reviewing, interpreting and amending bylaws; and many other skills lawyers can use to understand and serve clients and have successful legal careers. Like the old adage about the best time to plant a tree, the best time to hone those skills is years ago. The next best time is today.

### Why should I serve?

We all have a professional obligation to devote some of our time and talent to public service and work for our communities. But rather than just check off that box, consider why we chose a career that entails assisting others. Why did we choose to become lawyers? Why do we choose to serve clients and ask them to trust us with their money and their most important matters, decisions, and problems? And why do we think we are suited for that task?

As Simon Sinek identified in *Start With Why*, people are inspired by a sense of purpose, and our clients first are persuaded by what they think are our motives and personal purpose. When we communicate and demonstrate to others that our "Why" is to serve causes that we believe in, then we transmit reassurance that we will work diligently, honestly, and try our hardest on their matters. There is no better way to make connections in the community in a way that shows our service-oriented "Why" than working side-by-side with others on non-profit boards.

The intrinsic rewards of service are even greater. It is almost impossible to serve on a board and not make at least one lasting friendship. And the results of our efforts are often surprisingly impactful. Margaret Mead was not exaggerating when she said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

### One extra W: Welcome aboard!

A young lawyer who is welcomed on their first non-profit board may benefit from the following unsolicited advice: Jump in with both feet! Review the bylaws, financials, policies, and board minutes before the first board meeting. Request them if they are not provided. Consider revising organization documents if they do not reflect the organization's practices or allow the board needed flexibility. Meet with the executive director to get to know the strengths and challenges of the organization. Join a committee or two. Get to know the staff and beneficiaries, and volunteer some time to learn what they really do. Be there when services are being provided. Do not shy away from serving as an officer or even president, even soon after joining the board. There are few better leadership opportunities for young lawyers than serving as president of a non-profit. Most importantly, perform tasks for the organization with the same effectiveness as tasks for paying clients. For better or worse, most potential clients will assume that is how we will fulfill our duties to them if they become our clients.

Rather than being an additional burden to young lawyers, serving on a board can better equip us to deal with personal and professional pressures. Non-profit board service can motivate and inspire us, can boost client and professional development, and enrich our spirits with new relationships and skills. There is a non-profit organization in our community that shares your passions, who desperately needs an attorney on its board, and who is ready for our service.

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