

# 10 Tips on How to be a Great Volunteer Board Member

The learning curve for volunteers is high during the first year

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Many enthusiastic volunteers accept positions as part of a nonprofit board, committee or community effort such as local chambers of commerce, philanthropic groups or professional associations. The learning curve tends to be very high during the first year. They are thrilled that you stepped up, and you are excited to be involved. Now what?

**Tip No. 1** First, define your job and keep your role clear. If roles overlap too much, people assume that the other person is doing the job, and often that means that no one is doing that task.

**Tip No. 2** Know where to go to get information on how to do your job well. Ask for resources and ask questions so you don't waste time. Read and know your association's constitution and/or bylaws. They are often just a few pages in length, concisely state your association's mission, and many times define the duties of your office or committee chairmanship (see No. 1).

**Tip No. 3** Get a good verbal (and, if possible, written) turnover from the person you are replacing. Ask them if it is okay to get advice from them during your term. They will appreciate that you want to do a good job and that you respect them enough to ask for their advice.

**Tip No. 4** Prepare a turnover binder or package for the person coming after you. Take notes on:

- What worked well
- What can be improved
- What resources you used
- Your "go-to" people
- Specific lists of people, emails and phone numbers
- What you would do if you had the job another year

*Easy way to do this:* Give everyone a color-coded binder at the beginning of the term with the names of the other board members in the clear plastic on the front so they always have points of contacts handy. Give every person a notebook in a matching color and encourage them to keep it handy for board meetings, notes, etc. (I keep mine in my car so I always have it with me.)

**Tip No. 5** Create a folder on your computer for your association's information, emails, reports, etc. This makes it easier to create a turnover binder at the end of your term.

**Tip No. 6** There are also specific actions you can take while in the role. This includes:

- Respond quickly to the rest of the board. You don't want to be the person holding up other people.
- Recognize that time is the most precious gift anyone can give and respect their time.
- Have meetings for a reason and conclude by assigning tasks and reiterating responsibilities.
- Start meetings on time.
- Conduct meetings by Skype, Zoom or by phone conversion if you can, particularly when board members are separated by distance.
- Give other people deadlines when you need actions or information.
- Don't be late on deadlines to other people.
- Remember that just because other people do something a different way than the way you would do it doesn't mean it is wrong. If you are tempted to criticize, ask yourself first if you are willing to take over that job.

- When someone criticizes the efforts of your volunteer board or committee, help to get them involved. Assign them a task. Respond: “We’d love more help on that. What part of membership would you like to take on? Can we count on you to design our next marketing postcard?” (I interpret all complaints as a sign of volunteering.)

**Tip No. 7** Actively look for opportunities to promote the group and its other members. Remember that you are there for the group, not to promote your own self-interests.

**Tip No. 8** Use social media to communicate with the board and members. Most organizations do not fully utilize their Facebook pages or their websites, which is often the first-place people look to find information on the organization, its events or its members.

**Tip No. 9** Over-communicate and use more words rather than less. Remember that this is usually not what these board members do as a paid job, and that they may not understand what they are expected to do. As a board member, keep the rest of the board informed – of where you are in projects, when you are unavailable and when you need coverage of your job. If you know you cannot do something, letting other people know sooner is better than later.

**Tip No. 10** Realize that people generally get involved as a board member or as a committee member for emotional reasons. Committed people generally have an emotional as well as a social, financial, sports, business or other bond (such as a Homeowner’s Association) to the group, its people or its mission.

When people are part of a board, it is tempting to treat them as employees. Volunteers tend to need more guidance early on, more positive reassurance from the president as well as each other, and more communication to make sure they are fulfilling the mission and guidance of the president.

**Note:** *These are also helpful to consider when bringing new people into your organization in any capacity.*



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