



BE curious

Fresh perspectives

Business people who join charity boards must not assume it will be a nice cushy gig, say **DANIELA BARONE SOARES** and **JON HUGGETT**.

Curiosity – and proactively seeking to understand, improve and contribute – is the hallmark of effective trustees

Mary*, a top business leader, was invited to join the board of a non-profit we were involved with. She refused, saying “your board has a reputation of being too serious and doing too much work; it is no fun!”.

This was not a response we anticipated – why would a charity board be “fun”? Charities are trying to solve critical social problems and need all the support they can get. While Mary’s honesty was revealing, this surely would not be an acceptable response in the business she ran.

It’s clear that trustees from business can struggle in non-profits. On six continents, we’ve heard charity chief executives ask: “Why do my business trustees leave their brains at the door?”

The pitfall that trips many up is the idea of ‘giving back’. They may think they are automatically qualified to be a trustee because they have succeeded in business. While that is surely useful, business knowledge does not necessarily translate into the issues many charities face.

A charity can be harder to manoeuvre than a business. Salaries are low and good leadership is even more important, as staff only follow a leader who represents them and the cause well. The lack of profit motive does not mean ‘easy’, it often means ‘more complex’. Consider who is the ‘customer’ of a charity: is it the beneficiary of the programme, the backing donor, or the policymakers who can change the laws, policies and funding? It’s not unheard of for policy campaigns to be aligned with the objectives of the charity, but nevertheless alienate some large donors. These can be tricky issues to navigate.

Curiosity – and proactively seeking to


understand, improve and contribute – is the hallmark of effective trustees. They unpick the complexities of the sector, and the conflicting interests.

Peter*, another business leader, joined a different non-profit board. He accepted the offer, but stressed that, despite his seniority, he was a non-profit newbie. In his first meeting, he asked some naïve questions about a programme, which sparked a good discussion, which the chief executive found helpful. He volunteered to spend some time with the operations director to learn more, and armed with that knowledge, helped raise funds for the charity.

If you are a business person on a charity board, we suggest that you treat your brain to a long, refreshing walk. Ask, ask and ask again!

- Ask about the cause, and the problem the charity wants to solve
- Ask about the work: who the charity wants to help, how the work they do helps and why/how they know it works
- Ask about the people, who they are, and why they do what they do
- Ask about the money, where it comes from, and where it goes
- Ask about the board, and ask to observe a meeting before you join
- Ask your friends what they think of the charity, before you ask for money.

If you’re curious, you’ll contribute more, and have more fun, too. Look to Peter, not Mary, who turned down our board and did not know what she was missing!

(*) Not their real names. 

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