

# Finding the Right Fit as a Board Member

---

By Sharon Flanagan-Hyde

Josiah happily served for six years as a board member of a social profit organization focused on homeless youth, the maximum allowed by the board's term limit. He thought about transitioning to a volunteer direct-service role, but realized he truly enjoyed governance. He approached another social profit organization with a mission close to his heart and expressed interest in board membership. The board chair was thrilled to welcome a newcomer with solid board experience to their organization. Josiah was quickly nominated and elected to the board.



Six months later, Josiah was on the brink of resigning. “For six years, I helped make big decisions,” he told a co-worker. “We talked about how our work fit into the big picture in our community, how we could influence policies that impact homeless youth. Now, the board is talking about where to position the registration table for the gala and whether to use balloons or flowers as centerpieces. None of the other board members see a problem. They’re excited about making these decisions.”

What’s going on here? The problem is a mismatch between Josiah’s “sweet spot” as a board member and the lifecycle stage of the organization. Susan Kenny Stevens, Ph.D., author of *Nonprofit Lifecycles*, identifies seven stages of lifecycle capacity. The homeless youth organization sounds like it’s in the maturity stage, and the second likely is in the start-up stage.

Although the legal responsibilities of board members are consistent across organizations, the actual work of the board is highly stage related. Each stage has characteristic strengths and challenges. There’s no judgment in this. A start-up’s

boundless passion, the sprinting to keep up during the growth stage, and the steady leadership of maturity are all great places to be as a mission-driven organization.

A key to building a successful board, often overlooked, is matching the organization's current lifecycle stage to the temperaments and preferences of board members. Idea and start-up stage organizations, lacking a deep bench of paid staff, often welcome a board member with a CPA who is willing keep the books and a marketing expert who offers to create a communication and marketing plan. These "jump in and do it" folks may be frustrated if they find themselves on the board of a mature-stage organization; their offers to work side-by-side with the professional staff will be perceived as micromanaging.

Josiah's lesson learned is that he is most comfortable and useful as a mature stage board member. His board colleagues who enjoy handling the details of the gala bring much-needed value to the start-up organization; without their hands and hours, the work won't get done.

Social profit organizations and prospective board members are wise to ask the question, "What is our current lifecycle stage and how does that impact the attributes needed in board members?" The answers — hands-on workers, generative thinkers, strategic visionaries and a host of other attributes — can provide guidance to boards recruiting new members and to potential members seeking a good fit.

*Sharon Flanagan-Hyde is senior partner with Flanagan-Hyde Associates, LLC, a Lifecycles Master Consultant, and a BoardSource Certified Governance Trainer.*