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[Home](#) > [The Woman Advocate](#) > Articles

The Hidden Benefits of Board Service

By Mary-Christine (M.C.) Sungaila – June 12, 2015

Since 1996, I have served continuously on one or more nonprofit boards, as well as in bar leadership, on top of practicing appellate law full-time. I currently serve on the boards of the International Association of Defense Counsel Foundation, Coastline Community College Foundation, RAND Institute for Civil Justice, and the Western Justice Center Foundation. Previously, I served on the boards of Opera Pacific, Women Lawyers Association of Los Angeles, and Claremont Graduate University, and chaired the boards of national teen dating violence organization Break the Cycle and L.A.-based literary and poetry publisher Red Hen Press. Both as a newer lawyer and as a law firm partner, I have discovered many benefits to serving the community beyond the satisfaction of doing the right thing and giving back. I highlight five of those benefits here.

Nonprofit Boards Develop Leadership Potential

As a lawyer, you will lead teams on cases, and perhaps later lead your practice group or law firm. Nonprofit boards, which have committee structures and leadership ladders, are good training grounds for newer lawyers, providing opportunities to work with and lead teams toward a shared goal. The fundraising aspect of boards provides opportunities to build business development skills: once you have asked for donations to the charity whose board you serve on, you will be better equipped to approach potential clients for work. The more established and prestigious nonprofit boards also provide women lawyers with the experience they need to be considered for lucrative for-profit corporate board positions.

Nonprofit Boards Provide a Chance to Meet the Community, Which Can Lead to Work

Serving on a nonprofit board exposes you to a whole new set of leaders in the community, from philanthropists to executives and thought leaders. Serving together in furtherance of a common cause, and rolling up your sleeves together on board projects, provides the foundation for a deeper connection than would meeting these same people at a networking function. Board members often refer work to each other. They have seen you in action and trust your character, judgment, and passion, even though they may not have seen your legal work.

Nonprofit Boards Remind You of the Value You Bring as a Lawyer

Nonprofit directors often seek out lawyers for board service because of the deep analytical skills we bring to a problem. We break problems down into discrete, manageable pieces, and cut through the apparent morass to reach the clearest path to a solution. Our legal training makes us instinctively strategic thinkers, which is valuable to any organization.

Board Membership Also Reminds You of the Skills Nonlawyers Bring

Organizations benefit from a wide range of other professional and charitable experiences among their board members. Serving alongside those with business, literary, or social service training opens your eyes to the value that different perspectives can bring to a problem, and the benefits of having diverse problem solvers work together. It can also serve as a reminder, when working with clients, that the law is not the only thing to pay attention to; there may be business or organizational considerations to take into account when choosing a path to handle a dispute.

Board Membership Enhances Public Speaking and Advocacy Skills

As a board member, particularly as a board chair, you will be called on to speak to the media on behalf of the organization, write op-ed pieces, or speak at events. After speaking at multiple events one year, I noticed that my oral argument presentations had improved: rather than rushing through to make the points I wanted to make on behalf of my client, I slowed down and paid attention to the justices and what their body language indicated they were more interested in hearing about (just as I would with an audience when delivering a public speech).

Conclusion

These opportunities not only expand your skills and self-confidence, but they also can show you new avenues for influence and remind you that one person can make a difference. As board chair of Break the Cycle, for example, I was called on to coauthor op-eds about domestic violence laws for teens and to speak to the national and local media about the organization's 50-state annual report on the status of teen dating violence protection laws, or the lack thereof. One of our op-eds triggered the passage of a teen dating violence restraining order law in a state that previously had none.

In short, board service is rewarding in itself, but it can also enhance professional growth and open many other doors.

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