A Little Altruism Can Hone Your Leadership Skills

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Developing strong leadership skills is a key component of operating a successful business. If you are considering starting your own business or if you already own your own business, evaluate your current leadership skills. Where do you need improvement and how can you obtain these skills?

If time and money are not a consideration, there are formal courses at local colleges and online, as well as consultants who specialize in leadership training. But if you are financially stretched and time is at a premium, I have a suggestion to increase your leadership skills for free that requires only an investment of your time. Join a local, community board.

**Volunteer to Lead**

Every community has nonprofit organizations operated by a volunteer board of directors. Find an area of special interest to you and you can learn while you contribute to your community. A little planning can help you to choose the right board. If you have never served on a board before, I suggest you choose a board that is healthy and strong. You can obtain a list of nonprofit organizations in your community from the local chamber of commerce or from the local library. Look for a board whose mission statement moves you, is financially stable, and has a competent and stable senior leadership team. How do you find that out? Every board has to publish an annual report. These are usually available at the library or you can request one from the individual agency. Ask business leaders, current board members, and friends in your community about that organization.

Look at home health agencies, mental health centers, or a local hospital, but do not just limit yourself to the healthcare arena. There are also educational, arts, or cultural centers, such as the local humane society. Some boards are very popular and hard to get on. If that’s the case, offer to volunteer on a committee and work your way onto the board. Consider making an appointment with the organization’s executive director to discuss your interest and talents and what you could contribute as well as your learning goals.

Many boards ask members to commit to a 2- to 3-year term. Boards usually meet monthly and require you to serve on at least one committee. Also, plan on being involved with an annual strategic planning meeting and fund raising.

**A Wealth of Knowledge**

Many organizations have similar committee structures—finance, fund development, personnel, marketing/public relations, bylaws, and quality assurance—areas that business owners need to know about. Consider serving on a committee that will teach you something new. Many people shy away from a finance committee, but I serve on a board of a home health agency and have learned how to read balance sheets and income statements by this service.

Boards often offer new members board training and orientation. My board has sent me to workshops on board development that focused on group process, communication skills, and problem solving. I have also learned the difference between fund raising, fund development, and philanthropy.

The time I have spent on the board (now 4 years) has taught me many things. I am more confident in dealing with a diverse group of people and have improved my group organizational skills. I have also learned about finance and hiring processes in a large organization, participated in a conversion to a computerized medical record system, helped investigate adding TeleHealth to our organization, and was involved in planning, obtaining board approval, marketing, and fundraising for this venture.

Next year, I will be serving the board as its president and I look forward to expanding my leadership skills to another level.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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