

## The Empty Chair: A Message to Board Members



“...the duty-shirking board member becomes someone who is taking up a valuable and often bylaw-limited commodity...a seat at the boardroom table.”

It's not enough for a board member to just *love* the health care organization's mission. It's not enough for a board leader to simply *believe* in the value of the work. As a board member and mission leader, one simply must make a commitment not only to care about but also to meaningfully support the mission.

Board members, is it time for some personal soul searching and reassessment of your gifts of time and talent? As members, some of you have likely ploughed through the board member manual and sat through orientation. You may have even participated in your share of meetings. But regardless of the point in your board member journey, you may have come to the personal realization that what is entailed in "stepping up" is simply not for you. So, consider another gift: the gift of an empty chair.

Ponder this. It is always a disappointment to have someone on the board of directors who doesn't come to meetings, who isn't willing to set an example by making a personal financial gift or who doesn't have the time or inclination to get actively involved. However, most nonprofit organizations let this situation languish because it is too hurtful or embarrassing to confront those members about the inattention to their roles. Seemingly few board members take the subtle clue that "this applies to you" when boardroom conversations arise about

fulfilling individual board member expectations or even policy-driven requirements such as attendance. When this happens, the duty-shirking board member becomes someone who is taking up a valuable and often bylaw-limited commodity...a seat at the boardroom table.

If you have the self-insight to realize that you are, indeed, the board member who is going through the motions of membership without making any meaningful impact, consider freeing both yourself and the organization by making the move to gracefully resign. I assure you the nonprofit and your fellow board members will actually appreciate that proactive decision more than your lingering on the board until your term runs out. There very well may be someone else who is ready, willing and excited about filling that chair, and now.

A consideration for the board in general: While it is ambitious to hope board members will self-identify and address their own lack of involvement, it is important for the board to provide opportunities that also lead to vacating inactive seats. The Governance Committee of the board needs to be proactive in engaging with members who are not fully participating in the life of the board. There is merit and great value to personal phone calls or visits to find out what is going on in their lives. Quite often, circumstances have simply changed, or they are merely unaware of the responsibilities at hand. A private, personal conversation with a board leader appointed to the task of caring for the board and mission can provide both assistance and relief to the struggling board member.



**“ The gift of an empty chair provides the opportunity to engage someone else who has both the willingness and ability to elevate the mission and work of the organization. ”**

There is also kindness and grace to making the decision to depart easier. An opportunity should be given to everyone on the board to rethink their commitments. The chance to reconsider participation on an annual basis, even if term lengths are longer, gives them a way to gracefully bow out if needed. However, if taking this approach, you must make it very clear to the entire board that you will send a form to every member every year, so not to offend anyone or have

them feel singled out. It is as simple as distributing an annual “willingness to serve” form that reiterates all of the expectations of board membership, possibly including a checklist of each responsibility, and shares a message that goes something like this:

*“We understand that life changes and the good intentions you brought to this role may now be overshadowed by pressing personal, professional or other demands that now make it impossible for you to participate in the work of the organization at the level you desire. If you are no longer able to serve in this board capacity, the board will release you from your current term commitment and would then be delighted to consider you for future board membership if your availability changes.”*

Don’t put this off any longer. Now is a great time to reevaluate board participation. The gift of an empty chair provides the opportunity to engage someone else who has both the willingness and ability to elevate the mission and work of the organization. That’s a win for the organization. It’s also a win for board members in relieving the stress of continued excuses or the guilt of not fulfilling responsibilities at the level everyone desires. Sometimes, the greatest gift a board member can give is the gift of the empty chair.

---

About the Author: [Betsy Chapin Taylor, FAHP](#), is CEO of Accordant. She can be reached at [Betsy@AccordantHealth.com](mailto:Betsy@AccordantHealth.com).