



Family Giving Online Knowledge Center Board Activities and Training Procedures

TITLE: Dealing With Time Demands

SOURCE: *Trustee Notebook: An Orientation for Family Foundation Boards*

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DEALING WITH TIME DEMANDS

One of the first challenges that new trustees encounter is how to meet the time demands of their positions. Although participating on a family foundation board is voluntary, since virtually all family trustees serve without pay, foundation governance can be time-consuming.

First, there are meetings. Although the foundation may meet only four times a year, meetings always seem to come around quickly. They often last a full day, and frequently require some travel--particularly if the foundation has roots in different regions of the country. In addition, preparing for meetings and board service in general involves such tasks as:

- Reviewing and digesting proposals and grant applications or staff summaries;
- Attending site visits to prospective grantees;
- Attending training sessions and conferences to keep up with particular areas of grantmaking or issues of foundation governance; and
- Reading materials on trustee responsibilities in areas such as personnel, finances and budgeting, grantmaking, investments, and evaluation methods and results.

Potential trustees should always be apprised of the time demands and activities entailed in board service before accepting a position on the board. For trustees, being informed on issues of governance, as well as the foundation's areas of interest, is an important part of the responsibilities of board membership. Unless you are willing to commit to carrying out the responsibilities associated with trusteeship, regardless of the time involved, you should decline the position.

As a trustee, you must find ways to balance foundation duties with the other demands on your time. Once you have served as a trustee for a full grant period--three months if the foundation meets four times a year, six months if it meets twice a year, and so on--you will have a better sense of the time demands and expectations of trusteeship. To make this assessment:

- Note the tasks you have taken on and the time that was required to complete them.
- Assess where you have been most effective or helpful to the foundation.

- Don't try to be a specialist at everything. Identify what you do best and, if the time demands of trusteeship are a problem, plan to specialize in those areas. For instance, if you are already well informed on investment issues and can use that expertise to the benefit of the foundation, plan to spend more time in that area and less time in others. In addition, if you have expertise in a specific program area of the foundation's grantmaking, bring that knowledge and experience to the boardroom. And, if you are a generalist with no special area of interest, identify aspects of foundation work that appeal to you, perhaps an area that no other trustee has laid claim to, and become an "expert" in that area.
- Don't feel that you must participate in every site visit, but do try to participate in some--perhaps two, three, or four each year.
- Read summaries of grant proposals prepared by other board members or staff instead of the entire proposal or application. (This technique can be a tremendous time-saver, provided that fellow trustees agree to this shortcut.)

Finding the right balance between time devoted to the foundation and other responsibilities may take some figuring out. If, however, you find that you lack the time to be an effective trustee, consider rotating off the board at the conclusion of your term and rejoining at a later point.

Finally, when considering ways to save time, remember that attending foundation board meetings is not optional. Every trustee should be present, and properly prepared, for every meeting. Few excuses are acceptable for missing a board meeting. Many boards of family foundations require a certain level of attendance in order to remain in good standing.