

Qualities of the Good Trustee

In *Foundation Trusteeship: Service in the Public Interest*, John Nason revisited his exploration of the role of philanthropic governance that he began in his 1977 landmark book, *Trustees and the Future of Foundations*. In his second volume, Nason offered a list of the ten qualities of a good trustee.

1. Interest in and concern for the foundation and its field or fields of operation. The job is too demanding for anyone who lacks a fair degree of enthusiasm for the task.
2. Some understanding of the area of the special purpose foundation and some broad perspective on the problems of society for the general-purpose foundation. Eleanor Elliott of the Foundation for Child Development suggests that every trustee should be able to answer the question: "Namely: in 50 words or less, what is this place all about?" (From: "On Being a Trustee," *Foundation News & Commentary*, May/June 1984.)
3. Objectivity and impartiality are a *sine qua non*. The board table is no place for special pleading, for temperamental bias, for personal whim. The trustee is judge, not advocate, save with respect to donor's priorities.
4. Special skills. The board will need certain special forms of competence among its members — management, investment experience, familiarity with budgets, and knowledge of the law. Not all trustees need possess all these attributes. The value of planning and ...analysis of current membership lies in making certain that some trustees will possess some of these special kinds of expertise.
5. A capacity for teamwork, for arriving at and accepting group decisions. Irresolvable differences, the tactics of confrontation, *ad hominem* arguments, and lack of respect for one's fellow trustees are destructive of intelligent group decisions. These qualities demonstrate the danger of diversity carried to an extreme. Collegiality in the form of uniform outlook is stultifying; collegiality as a way of disagreeing, yet working harmoniously together is essential.
6. Willingness to work. This means a willingness to give time and thought to the affairs of the foundation, to arrange one's personal schedule so as to be available to attend meetings, to serve on committees, to undertake special assignments, and to wrestle with the problems of the foundation.
7. Practical wisdom. This is more easily recognized than described. It involves the capacity to see the whole picture, to recognize the validity of opposing arguments, to distinguish principle from expediency, and to temper the ideal with what is realistically possible.
8. Commitment to the foundation as a whole and not to special interests or constituencies. The trustee's responsibility is to the foundation.
9. Commitment to the idea of philanthropic foundations. No foundation is an island unto itself. Every trustee, even in small family foundations, has a responsibility to act in such a way that the foundation world is strengthened and not weakened.
10. Moral sensitivity to the act of giving and to the need for giving. Paul Ylvisaker called the latter a "sense of outrage"—outrage over people dying of cancer or of AIDS, over children born to poverty and deprivation, over the destruction of the environment, over the threat of nuclear annihilation. Merrimon Cuninggim [a former college president and foundation trustee] described the former as "the potential immorality of giving," the ego satisfaction of the giver, the corrupting influence of the sense of power.

(One family foundation found this list so compelling that the board drafted a Trustee Qualification and Values Statement based on it. For this statement, see p. 241.)