

Business and Community: A Valued Partnership

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment to improve the world.

--- Anne Frank

Martin Campbell, 68, is a dedicated CEO of a successful family food business that employs 300 people. He is married, has three grown children, plays golf, and enjoys the luxury of reflective time. As long as he can remember, he has been active on community boards.

Why do people like Martin Campbell devote time and capital to not-for-profit activities? What challenges do they face working with community organizations? And what have they learned through their experiences?

We posed these questions to a number of community leaders – those who work full time in their business and graft on additional time to serve their community.

One of the CEOs we spoke with observed that the most successful business leaders are the ones who feel it is their responsibility to give back to the community. They find it a privilege and honor to be asked to serve.

Others like Daniel Jick, CEO of High Vista Strategies, an asset management firm, become involved for personal reasons: “I’ve been involved in a number of organizations that have touched my family’s life in a positive way – the college my wife and I attended, the hospital where my children were born, the place my parents got wonderful medical care and the schools my children attended”.

While many CEOs enjoy the opportunity to interact with prestigious organizations stocked with movers and shakers, they also value their interactions with other board members and with the talented professionals who lead these organizations. As one leader put it: “I’m inspired by their dedication, passion, vision and execution. The outstanding professionals combine these traits with a smart business sense and the capacity to juggle staff, donors, politics, tight budgets, and community.”

An example of this symbiotic relationship is seen through the eyes of Evie Goldfine, a former board member of a technology company and a successful recipient of a bone marrow transplant. She has worked with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Boston, inspiring its members to register people for bone marrow tests.

What Community Leaders Have Learned

As one leader remarked, “I initially felt I was doing something for the organization. Little did I realize what they were doing for me. I’m quietly proud of my contributions and feel more connected to where I live”.

Others have learned to listen better, refrain from dominating discussions, measure their words, and not compare their business to the not-for-profits. One volunteer learned the difference between “working *for*” and “working *with*”. “In my company”, he explained, “people work *for* me. In the community, we work *with* others. And we are all equal stakeholders.”

The Challenges

Ron Ware, JD, President and CEO of Wealth Impact Partners, observes that “the pace of change, innovation and decision-making can sometimes be painfully slow. Old habits die hard and there are many hidden ‘bureaucracies’, as well as antiquated mindsets and models, that exist within the non-profit community”. Ware’s solution is to gently serve as a catalyst for change, and to continually remind people of the social impact their time and money can have on the organizations they care about most.

A number of leaders left Boards because they found some of their fellow Board members were too risk-averse, had too narrow a perspective, and were too involved in the thick of things.

All the people we talked with shared one fundamental concern: the frustration of grafting time onto impossibly-tight schedules, and making significant tradeoffs among self, family, work and community.

Through our experience with successful community leaders, we offer the following advice: Know yourself well. Don't get pressured to assume an assignment. If in doubt, share your concerns with seasoned pros. Learn what is and is not possible in your jam-packed schedule. Do not make promises you can't keep. Have the discipline to follow through on your decisions. Understand that you have to invest yourself in a Board. And recognize that, no matter how tempting, *prestige alone* is a dangerous siren to join a Board.

In the Foreword to the book *Shared Purpose*, Jeff Swartz, CEO of Timberland, makes a compelling case about community service: "By allowing business to view itself as a self-contained economic institution, we have failed to demand the kind of value that can be created when business engages with society. The business of business is to serve not just the shareholder, but the employees, customers and community."

We believe in the paradox that what you want most in life you need to give away. If you want respect, trust and commitment, you need to give it to others. And in most situations it will boomerang back to you.

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Please note: This piece was written prior to Richard Levin & Associates formally joining CFAR in 2019.

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