

# Bespoke boards: Find the nonprofit that fits

*Joining a nonprofit board that suits your interests is not simply a matter of matching the mission to your passion. It's also about finding the board where you can play a meaningful role, while developing your leadership potential.* **BY ALICE KORNGOLD**

**W**HEN BRUCE J. KLATSKY joined the board of Human Rights Watch in 1985, the board consisted primarily of people with expertise in human rights and advocacy. Klatsky, who was chairman and CEO of Phillips-Van Heusen Corp., saw his participation on the HRW board as an opportunity to bring operational integrity and longer-term financial sustainability to a worthy organization whose mission he was passionate about. Klatsky added valuable business acumen and rose to a leadership position as vice chair of the board. The organization has since grown six-fold throughout the world.

When thinking about joining a nonprofit board, there are two key considerations. First, find an organization with a mission that resonates with you. The second factor is critical but usually ignored: It is paramount to join a board where you can add value to advance the nonprofit. In this way, you will make a meaningful contribution to the organization and grow as an individual personally and professionally. Your nonprofit board participation will become a unique leadership development experience, and you

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that trains business professionals and places them on nonprofit boards. She is the author of *Leveraging Good Will: Strengthening Nonprofits by Engaging Businesses* (Jossey-Bass, a Wiley imprint, 2005). This article builds on her prior article, "Amassing Your Governance Capital," that appeared in the Third Quarter 2007 edition of *DIRECTORS & BOARDS*.

will gain new skills that will help you in the business world, as well.

## A tool to find the right fit

Clearly, mission-fit is essential. That is a personal decision based on issues that matter to you the most. In many cases, though, individuals have a wide variety of interests ranging from the arts to education, health care, and social services, and from local to national and global issues.

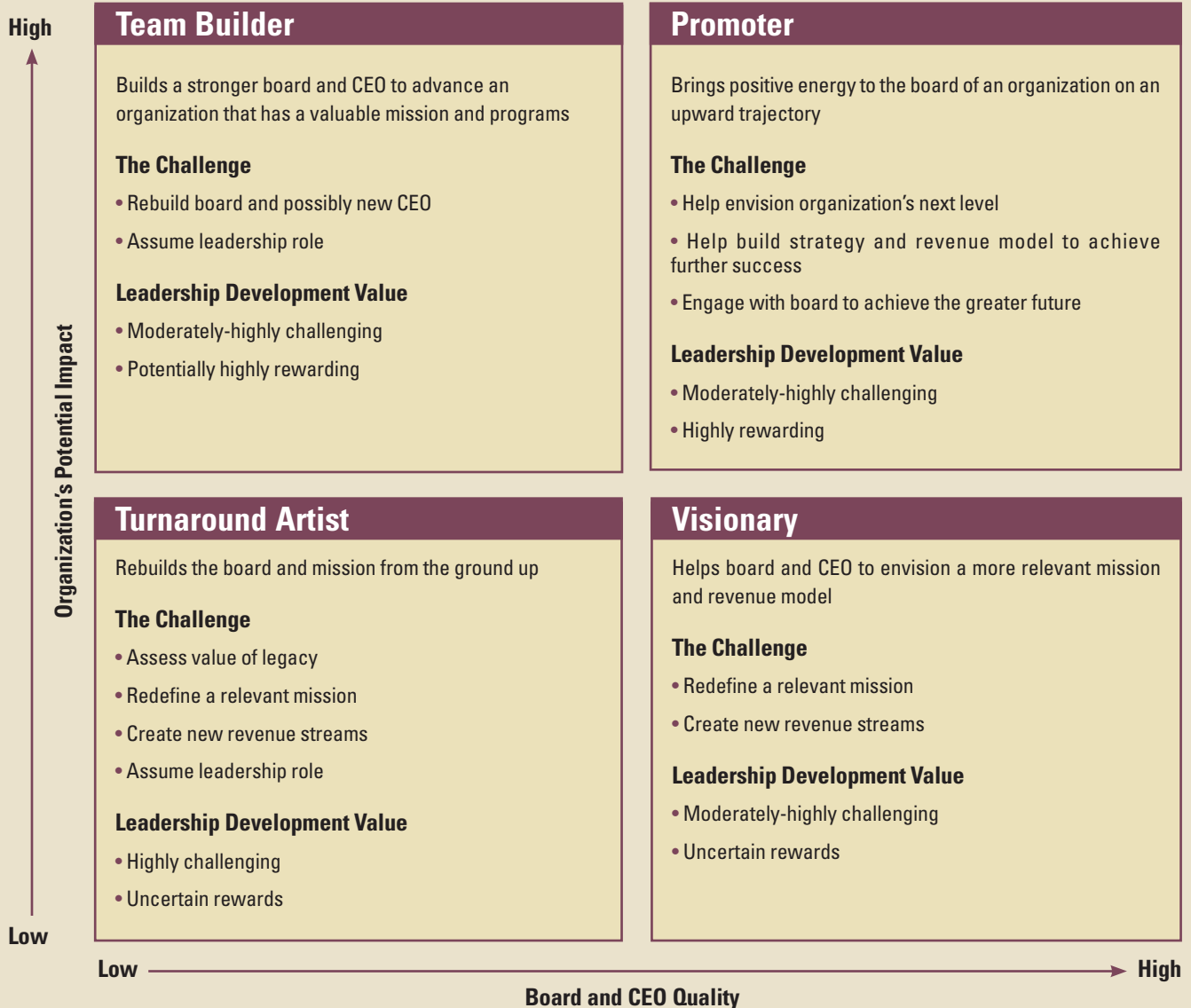
Even more significant, board candidates must understand how they can be useful to the organization in advancing the cause. To help choose the right board for you, plot yourself on the accompanying chart. This will help you to find the right fit. You can determine the kind of board member you envision yourself to be, while also graphing the nonprofit boards you are considering:

- **Promoter:** This is where you would place yourself if you want to join a generally healthy board and organization that also has a vision for reasonable growth, development, and expansion. This quadrant is for you if you want to bring expertise, experience, or relationships to the table, but perhaps you are juggling too much in your career and personal life to devote enormous amounts of energy and time at the moment. You can add value without being heroic, or you may choose to rise to leadership and play an even greater role.

- **Team Builder:** This quadrant describes boards and organizations whose potential impact is very high: The mission and programs are strong, but the board and CEO are weak. Plot yourself here if you are ready, willing, and able

## Choosing a nonprofit board: Assessing your leadership development opportunities

The **vertical (y) axis** indicates the extent to which the organization has or can have a vital impact in addressing a compelling issue. The **horizontal (x) axis** shows the extent to which the organization has the leadership — a quality board and chief executive — to maximize success for the organization to achieve its potential.



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to take the time and energy to help build the board and perhaps engage a new CEO. You will play an important role in advancing the organization, and this can potentially be highly rewarding. Just know what you are taking on.

• **Visionary:** This quadrant describes organizations whose missions and revenue streams need to be updated, but there is talent on the board and

perhaps even an effective CEO. Here there is an opportunity to harness existing institutional qualities and take the organization in a new direction. The strength of the organization might lie in its legacy of founders and donors, alumni (if it's an educational program or institution), or reputation. Going forward, however, the organization may face challenges. For example, changes in government funding and new approaches from private funders often

challenge old revenue streams. The satisfaction in the Visionary role comes from working with smart board members and the CEO in elevating an organization to achieve its full potential.

• **Turnaround Artist:** Organizations in this quadrant suffer from outdated missions, weak revenue streams, dysfunctional boards, and weak CEOs. This can be highly rewarding for the enterprising person who has the talent to identify an organization that can be revitalized in order to have a valuable impact. This is a chance to rebuild an organization with a niche that is of critical importance to the future of the community. A person with leadership ability and an entrepreneurial spirit can rally the right board, hire an excellent CEO, identify new and active funding streams, and achieve success. Truly go in with your eyes wide open if you take on this challenge.

#### Profile: Visionary leadership

Cathryn Cronin Cranston joined the board of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists in June 2004 and was asked to serve

as chair of the board, effective November 2005. At the time, she was the publisher of *Harvard Business Review*.

Cranston joined the Bulletin because of mission-fit. The Bulletin was an organization with a rich history dedicated to security, science, and survival since 1945. The organization is particularly noted for its “Doomsday Clock,” a symbolic measure of the imminence of global catastrophic destruction. Cranston believes in “informing society about the proliferation and dangers of nuclear weapons, based on highly accurate science, reported without fear or favor.”

Although the organization thrived for four decades, it lost its way after the Cold War. Cranston knew the Bulletin was struggling, and the appeal of helping to revitalize the organization was a challenge she couldn’t resist. She also saw that she had value to add in terms of her publishing background because the Bulletin’s publications are the key vehicle for the Bulletin to accomplish its educational mission.

Cranston talks about the importance



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— Cathryn Cronin Cranston

of an honest institutional assessment. “We had to admit that the mission and organization had atrophied, the organization was failing financially, we needed as content providers to become part of the 21st century, and we had to establish a compelling presence,” she says. Cranston further explains that this would involve a shift in emphasis to become a digital distributor of content, which the Bulletin, like other publishers, would have to learn as they go.

Supplementing the board with luminaries from the scientific, philanthropic, and business communities and hiring an experienced foundation executive as CEO, Cranston used her professional experience to help guide the organization in a strategic overhaul. The organization also created a new revenue model to achieve fi-

financial sustainability; the Bulletin determined to increase individual giving and earned income while also solidifying key foundation relationships. Importantly, Cranston also launched a process to restructure the board in order to raise more money from and through the board. Under Cranston’s leadership, the Bulletin is building on its strong history, while pushing forward into a new, visionary future with increasing revenues.

Last year, Cranston left *HBR* to become executive vice president of Mansueto Ventures, publisher of the leading media business brands *Inc.* and *Fast Company*. Cranston says that her experience with the Bulletin helped her decide to accept the new job: “I realized that I could play a bigger role in business than I was playing as publisher of *HBR*, because as chair of the board, you look at all roles of the enterprise and how they are interrelated. You also realize that in that leadership role, you have a combination of imperfect information and you have to trust your gut in making certain decisions.”

#### Profile: Promoting to a new level

Michael J. Short, executive vice president and chief financial officer of AutoNation Inc., serves as chair of the board of Give Kids the World (GKTW). GKTW fulfills the wishes of children with life-threatening illnesses from around the world by bringing them



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to GKTW's nonprofit resort for a memorable, cost-free visit to Central Florida attractions.

When Short, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and Columbia Business School, came to GKTW, he found an organization with great fundamentals and a first-rate team of people. Short also recognized the imperative to build for the future in order to ensure the organization's future success. He explains, "We stepped back from what we were doing and looked at the longer-term needs. We realized that demand had far outstripped our capacity and expansion was necessary." Short and GKTW CEO Pamela Landwirth are now leading the effort on a \$36 million expansion of the organization's facility.

Based on his experience, Short advises business executives that nonprofit board service must be taken seriously. As he says, "Don't assume that just because it's a nonprofit it doesn't require the same level of discipline and rigor as a public board." Short's success in advancing GKTW is a testament to his having taken his role with the board seriously.

Short's role with GKTW can best be described as a Promoter: He has played a leadership role in taking a good organization to new heights. Further, in order to engage volunteer board members to help take a healthy nonprofit organization and elevate it to the next level, Short realized that his leadership style would need to be consultative — listening to board members, role modeling through his own generosity, and thanking and recognizing people for their support. "We were asking people to give who had no obligation to do so. The board and donors needed to embrace the vision and feel part of it." For Short, this experience provided valuable lessons in relationship building that translated back to the business environment.

### Profile: The turnaround artist

"I accepted the role because I believed in the mission, and I thought I could make a difference," explains Richard D. Parsons, chairman and chief executive officer of Time Warner Inc. Parsons assumed the responsibility to build a board to re-establish the Apollo Theater as a nonprofit foundation seven years ago.

The Apollo Theater was originally built in 1914 in the heart of Harlem. By the 1930s, the theater was home to thousands of performance artists, fans, and patrons of the arts from around the world, and emerged as the nation's most popular arena for African-American and Latino performers. The legendary venue, however, failed to compete in the '70s owing to its small size, and was shuttered until it was reopened in 1992 as a nonprofit corporation.

Relaunching the Apollo and bringing it to its full potential required taking an historical insti-

tution and imagining and generating a new nonprofit out of whole cloth. Under Parsons' leadership, since 2000 the Apollo Theater Foundation has built a board made up of leaders in entertainment, business, and the community, as well as engaged a management team. The theater now provides year-round education and community outreach programs in addition to a steady calendar of performances, concerts, and events. Parsons says that the foundation is two-thirds of the way toward its goal of raising \$65 million to renovate the theater and advance longer-term organizational sustainability.

This challenging venture involves considering a variety of elements. Parsons explains that the special dilemma facing the Apollo Theater Foundation is "keeping one foot in the camp of popular entertainment and another in expanding arts and driving for new creation." Parsons also talks about the importance of balancing attention on the roots of the theater while focusing on present and future community interests. And he particularly relishes the mix of people on the board and the variety of perspectives they bring to the table as the foundation plans ahead.

Although nonprofit board commitments are significant, each one presents new and important learning experiences, in addition to the satisfaction of advancing a cause in which you believe. Given Parsons' long list of corporate and community leadership roles, one might think there is little he could gain from one more. To the contrary, he claims that "each leadership experience is unique, because you are always dealing with different personalities and dynamics."

### Learning while serving

Nonprofit board service is the ultimate experience in ethics, accountability, leadership, group dynamics, crisis communications and strategic planning. You join a team of peers in envisioning the organization's greater potential in addressing a vital community need (local or global), establishing the revenue model to make that vision possible, and bringing about success.

When you find the board that suits your interests, you will learn, grow, shine, reflect well on your company, and truly make a meaningful contribution. ■

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